# Infinite Loops Project: Garreg Mach Class of 1180 Edition

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The Infinite Loops Project comes to Fódlan! Join Byleth and Sothis as they're thrust into infinitely repeating time with friends from their world and beyond.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2020-05-02

Updated: 2021-01-14

Words: 46521

Chapters: 3

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Drama - Reviews: 6 - Favs: 60 - Follows: 77

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13571213/1/Infinite-Loops-Project-Garreg-Mach-Class-of-1180-Edition

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# Infinite Loops Project: Garreg Mach Class of 1180 Edition


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# Chapter 1

Once upon a time, eons upon eons ago, the great world tree known as Yggdrasil, supercomputer that runs all iterations of reality both real and fictional, was incomprehensibly and nearly mortally damaged by something utterly unknown. The systems administrators of Yggdrasil, whom we would consider Earth's various mythological gods and spirits, were forced to set all of these various realities into time loops so as to prevent further damage to the tree. As the tree attempts to reconstruct itself during this period (which could functionally last forever), it has to run these loops in many varying ways in order to try and fill in the blanks left by the damage. This could in turn cause reality itself to spiral out into an endless mush of constantly changing nonsense, so the Admins decided to stabilize matters by appointing Anchors for each Branch of reality, characters that can remember the loops and are metaphysically responsible for the stability of their Branch. Clearly keeping them stable is a high priority, so the Admins have also allowed some of their fellow characters to Loop alongside them, to keep them from going completely mad.

Confused yet?

Welcome to the Infinite Loops Project if you're not already familiar with it, one of the longest and largest collaborative writing projects on the internet. This massive project is a crossover Peggy Sue universe nearly ten years in the making now, and the lore builds up. This compilation of the work of multiple authors, cataloguing the particular Loops of the Fire Emblem: Three Houses Branch of Yggdrasil, follows up on a lot of plot developments and lore from other compilations, and I would highly suggest you read one of those other compilations before this one if you want to make sense out of it. In particular, I'd recommend Skaz Wolfman's " **The Infinite Loops Project: Doki Doki Literature Club Compilation,** " also on this site, because it provides an excellent introduction to the concept and

shows the origin of one of the most important outside characters in this story.

If you're still reading, I'm so glad I didn't manage to scare you off yet! Without further ado, here's the story!

**1.1 (by Zum1UDontNo)**

[Fire Emblem: Three Houses] [Admin Shenanigans] [Mythos Hackers]

Activate the Branch *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* ?

Chosen Anchors: Byleth/Sothis (Soulbound Co-Anchors)

**(+) Yes (-) No**

Hecate stared at the screen, her eyes narrowed in thought. The confirmation bubble stared back at her, tauntingly. Her finger hovered over the + button on her terminal's Joycon, only to swap to the - button on the other Joycon with her other hand. She rested her finger on the button for a few seconds, before moving back to the + button. All around her, the other sixty-three terminals arranged around her office were switched off; only the sixty-fourth, the one she was using, was active.

She gritted her teeth for a moment, before pressing down on the + button decisively...

Are you sure?

**(+) Yes, Activate it (-) No, don't**

...and immediately pressed the - button, bringing her back to the original screen.

The Admin of the Nintendo Cluster was frustrated and indecisive, but at least it wasn't anything new. She'd been having this debate with herself all day, and it had gotten in the way of her work.

Compared to the other Fire Emblem Branches, and other Branches in general, Three Houses was tricky. Most of them had only a single Baseline. Fates *technically* had three, but they were dependent on Corrin's choices early in the Branch, and it at least had a "best ending" that could be used. Meanwhile, Three Houses had *four* Baselines. Much like Fates, it was dependent on the choices made by the "player character," aka the Anchor candidate Byleth. This led to a good amount of variability, which was hardly what was desired in a Branch. And unlike Fates, it wasn't fortunate enough to have an obviously best route.

To make matters worse, there was a lot left to the fickle hand of variability in the Anchor's life that they *couldn't* control. Their exact age, gender and birthday were all undefined, meaning they would never have a concrete answer. Even their name, too, was variable- it would lean towards Byleth far more often, but it was still variable enough that every so often they wouldn't even be used to their own name. Assuming it did Activate without a hitch, Byleth- or whatever their name was that loop- could rapidly become unstable. Even though there were other Loopers with similar conditions, it was still hardly desirable and could result in them or Sothis harboring dangerous thoughts. Thoughts that could lead to Sakura Syndrome, or Setsuna Syndrome, or even becoming an Ascension risk. Add on other miscellaneous problems with the setting, like Those Who Slither in the Dark and the pesky Divine Pulse, and Hecate was left with one nasty universe.

All signs pointed to it being a *bad* idea to Activate... but that was where the problem lay. She had *dealt* with problematic Branches before. She Admined almost every Nintendo Branch, of course there were going to be problems somewhere! Most of the other Fire Emblem Branches had been delicate, and she was still able to handle them in the end. She was experienced enough to do this, she *knew* she was.

Maybe Fódlan was *too* unstable to Loop... but if it was, she didn't want to admit it to herself.

So she sat, staring at one of many monitors in her office. Staring at a single confirmation bubble with two inputs. Hovering her finger over one button, before switching to the other, and doing it again. She was so deep in her own mind, a runaway train couldn't break her out of her concentration.

Luckily for her, or perhaps unluckily depending on how you look at things, she was about to get a visitor. One significantly more disruptive than a train.

"Hello, dear Hecate."

Hecate's head snapped up, before she let out a groan. "Oh, come on, why are you here *now* ?"

"Because I'm not currently anywhere else, of course." The great Outer God strode his way through the door, leaning on her chair casually. "So, what are you up to? Oh, don't mind me, go ahead and continue what you were doing."

"Nyarlathotep, get out of my office."

"Mmm, a tempting suggestion, but I think I'll pass."

Hecate massaged her forehead, squeezing her eyes shut. Whenever Nyarlathotep, or any of his other Lovecraftian 'friends' were around, things were never made any easier. The Mythos Hackers were well known for causing trouble and being general nuisances.

She turned her head to stare at the Crawling Chaos. "Don't you have anything better to do? Why not hang out with the other Hackers, or something?"

"Oh, I *tried,* but they're all too busy for me." Nyarlathotep began counting on his fingers, which split into bisected nails at the ends. "Yog-Sothoth is taking a century-long nap, and I'd rather not put my life on the line and wake him... Cthulhu is watching the Splatoon Branch like it's a damn sitcom... Hastur and Cthugha are spending

time with the Haiyore Loopers and Skuld still won't let more than two of us visit them at a time... Who am I supposed to spend time with, Azathoth? That's a funny joke." He made finger guns at Hecate. "To answer your question, no, I don't have anything better to do but bother you. Lucky you."

"Lucky me," Hecate groaned. His voice was grating on its own, but the way it bounced around the room was painfully eldritch to listen to. "Don't you have any other Branches you're interested in? Why not make like Cthulhu and spend your time watching a Loop?"

Nyarlathotep clicked his tongue. "As a matter of fact, I am rather interested in one of the Branches. The Doki Doki Literature Club has caught my eye as of late. That's the Branch that Ganesha handed off to Psyche, by the by." He draped himself over Hecate's chair, causing her to lean away from him. "Natsuki and Yuri are an interesting enough couple, and Sayori is remarkably skilled at solving emotional problems, but if I'm being honest? Their Anchor is the most intriguing to me."

"Cool," Hecate responded flatly. "Why aren't you watching them do their thing, then?"

The Outer God's face twitched in annoyance. "Because they haven't done anything interesting in *so long!* It's been all, *ooh, let's braid each other's hair. Let's watch a Youtube video. Let's cause an alien invasion and stop it with the power of electrons.* Oh, it's all been such a bore!" After a deep breath, Nyarlathotep calmed himself down. "Why can't they have any infighting or romantic realizations or epic Fused Loops or *something* ? It's like they've forgotten the art of drama! Honestly, ever since Sayori and Monika put their feet down on being teased with each other and Yuri finished her vampirization, it's grown terribly stale."

"The Loops aren't made for your personal entertainment, Nyarlathotep," Hecate chided, returning to her monitor. "Whether or not they're 'dramatic' is hardly the point of fixing Yggdrasil."

"Oh? So I suppose I *shouldn't* be watching them do their thing, as you suggested not two moments ago?" Nyarlathotep's face slowly shifted into a smug grin, the edges of his mouth quite literally creeping up his cheeks. "I might as well hang around then, if there's no point to making like Cthulhu."

Hecate stiffened, before groaning. She'd fallen into one of his most common ploys.

"Now that we've gotten that out of the way, what *are* you working on, Hecate dear?" The God of a Thousand Forms leaned over her shoulder, putting on a comically small set of reading glasses and staring at her monitor. "Fire Enblem: Three Houses? Are the Loopers building a village? Has your Cluster finally crossed over with Minecraft?"

"It's Fire *Emblem,* " Hecate hissed, "and no, it has nothing to do with the Minecraft Branch."

"That's a shame. Sans Undertale and Cuphead Cuphead finally got into Smash, I was hoping Steve Minecraft could follow them someday. A crossover with this Fire Enblem place could lead right into that." Nyarlathotep tapped the screen curiously. "So then, what *are* these three houses about, anyway, if not cuboidal construction?"

Hecate muttered lowly, before responding. "Fire Emblem: Three Houses is a Branch I'm considering Activating. I'm not sure if I should, since it poses stability risks."

"And why is that? Are you afraid miss Enblem won't be a suitable Anchor? Suitable like Metroid or Captain F-Zero? Or Star Fox?"

"The Anchor's name is not Emblem! And it's *Samus, Captain Falcon* and *Fox!* ...And stop pretending you don't know about these Branches, I know for a fact you're well aware!"

"Oh, what about Zelda? Have you made sure he's a suitable Anchor recently, with his green tunic and Master Sword?"

Hecate huffed. "For your information, I don't even Admin the Hyrule Branch, so that particular one doesn't bother me."

"Hmm." Nyarlathotep grew an extra eyebrow, before raising it. The flesh around his eyebrow stretched off his face to allow it to rise higher. "Ignoring the fact that it clearly does bother you... I sense unrelated bitterness. Do you dislike the fact that Hyrule is not under your dominion?" He shrunk his forehead back to its previous size with an audible *snap* , like a rubber band. The eyebrow shriveled into dust.

Hecate set her jaw. "I never said that."

"But you were thinking it."

"Hrrmmmm..." Hecate groaned for a moment, before throwing her arms up. "Fine. You caught me. I don't like that I don't have the entire Cluster, okay? It's hardly a secret, anyway."

"Not a secret, and yet you were reluctant to tell me." Nyarlathotep tapped her terminal again. "I presume this is your attempt at increasing your list of properties for yourself? Adding one measly Branch to the pile so you can inflate your ego ever higher?"

The Goddess of the Crossroads sighed. "I Admin the majority of the Nintendo Cluster, but there are still Branches out of my reach. The Pokémon Branches are handled by Yuetu, Legend of Zelda is handled by Epona, Smash is handled by Madoka and Splatoon is handled by Kanaloa. There's still plenty left for me, but it's not *enough.* And the other Admins are saying they're thinking about limiting future Branches I can Admin. If ARMS becomes unstable enough to require Looping, it'll be handed off to someone else."

Nyarlathotep tapped his chin in thought with one hand, and tapped her chin in thought with the other. "And why would that be?"

Hecate rolled her eyes, swatting his hand away from her chin. "Something something workload, something something too many

Branches for one Admin to handle. I'm fine with Madoka having Smash, she deserves it after fixing Master Hand's code, but come on! I can totally handle the rest, but they won't let me!"

"And you want the other Branches given to you? The Pokémon, Zelda and Splatoon Branches?"

"Well..." Hecate waggled her hand unsurely. "I guess... I mean, I don't *really* want the other Branches, since the Loopers have grown accustomed to their Admins' respective styles of Adminship... the problem is the *reason* they got the Branches. They think I'm in over my head when I'm *not.* "

Nyarlathotep's eyes lit up in understanding, momentarily bathing the room in an uncomfortable green glow. "Ah, I get it now. You believe if you manage to Activate this troublesome Branch, the other Admins will realize your worth and grant you additional Branches. A fine strategy, might I say."

Hecate pursed her lips, before nodding slowly. "Yes, that's... exactly what I was doing. Yep."

The Crawling Chaos chuckled to himself. "They really don't believe you're capable enough to handle that many Branches." He shrugged. "Can't say I'm surprised. The *vast* majority of them are notably unable to see past their own noses."

"What are you getting at?"

"What do you *think* I'm getting at?"

Hecate turned in her chair to glare at him. "I like a lot of games, Nyarlathotep. This is not one of them."

Nyarlathotep let out a dramatic groan. "Fine, I'd much rather have had you figure it out yourself, but if you're going to *make* me say it bluntly, I guess I will." He pointed at her. "You're... *talented.* Good at

what you do. There, you made the words come out of my mouth. Blech."

Hecate reeled back, caught off guard. His words were *completely* unexpected. The Mythos Hackers didn't do random compliments. "I... what?"

" *Don't* make me repeat myself." Nyarlathotep cleared his throat. "The point is, they're severely underestimating you by withholding Branches from your dominion. You've surely proven yourself competent to them, so at this point they're just being silly."

"I..." Hecate shook her head. "Man, you know it's a weird day when *you're* the voice of reason..."

"It's an advantage I have over many of my ilk." Nyarlathotep patted his chest proudly. "Bastard though I may be, you have to admit I do typically have a point."

Hecate nodded. "You're right on that one. I often feel like you and the other Hackers collectively share three brain cells, and you usually have two of them."

"Who has the third?"

"It's juggled between Hastur and Yog-Sothoth."

"Ah, that checks out." Pause. "So, are you planning on Activating that Branch?"

Hecate sighed, turning her head back to the monitor. The soft blue glow of the screen still remained, with the same confirmation bubble staring back at her.

Activate the Branch *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* ?

Chosen Anchors: Byleth/Sothis (Soulbound Co-Anchors)

**(+) Yes (-) No**

"I had almost forgotten about this," she murmured. "I'm not so sure-"

"Oh don't give me that," Nyarlathotep scoffed. "We just got done talking about how you're, ugh, *talented* , and now you're still having doubts?"

"What are you-"

"Listen, Hecate," he cut her off. "I'm tired of dancing around this, it gives me a headache. You want more Branches? Then you need to prove you deserve them. This is just the chance for you to do that, do you understand?"

Hecate blinked. "The chance?"

"Fire Emblem: Three Houses is a complicated Branch," he continued, gesturing in the air dramatically. "But you've dealt with worse! I remember the Activation of Awakening, and that was arguably *more* troublesome than this one!"

"But Fire Emblem: Awakening had a lot of problems initially-"

" *Every* Branch has problems initially!" Nyarlathotep snapped his fingers. "But you pulled through, and now look at it! Looping without a worry in the world! And look at all your other Branches! Do you remember the Great Crash, and how *nothing* happened to your Branches?"

Hecate shook her head. "That's just a lie. The Earthbound Branch sustained heavy damage, with data of Ness's father being destroyed and Porky Minch being Activated-"

"Some numbers got lost and a mean little kid became a Looper." Nyarlathotep rolled his eyes. "Compared to the damage so many other Branches sustained, Branches with only *one* Admin, your Cluster was practically untouched! And that's because of you!"

"I mean..." Hecate puffed out her chest slightly. "I guess I did pretty good..."

"There! You admit it!" Nyarlathotep grinned, light glinting off his yellow teeth. "You're fully capable of Activating this Branch, don't you realize?"

Unconsciously, Hecate's finger hovered over the + button. It rested firmly on it, not pressing down but not rising away either. "It's still risky..."

"The rewards outweigh what risk there is!" Nyarlathotep spread his arms wide. "Imagine what the other Admins will think, when they see this Branch Activated! *Wow,* they'll say, *she got Three Houses Looping? Hecate's really good! Maybe we can give her some of the other Branches, she's got her act cleaned up* ! Don't you want that?"

"I... do, but-"

"But nothing!" Nyarlathotep pounded his fist on the table next to him, before pointing directly at her. "Activate Three Houses already! What in the world are you waiting for!?"

"...I will. I will!" Hecate pressed down in the + button.

Are you sure?

**(+) Yes, Activate it (-) No, don't**

"Yes!" Nyarlathotep shouted, pumping his fist. "Activate it! You're so close to everything you want!"

Another press of the + button.

Are you really, really sure?

**(+) I'm sure. Activate it. (-) Don't Activate it!**

"Do it! Your goal is within reach!"

"I'm going to do it! I'm doing it!" Hecate pressed + again, her mouth set into a confident grin. This time, the bubble was accompanied by a red alert label.

WARNING: This can't be undone. Once *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* is Activated, it will remain Activated **forever.** Are you **REALLY** sure?

**(+) Activate it! Let's do this! (-) Stop! I changed my mind!**

She rested her finger on the + button one final time, her eyes focused on the screen with a determined glint. One more time, and it would go through. Fire Emblem: Three Houses would be her newest Branch.

"Just once more!" Nyarlathotep rested an icy-cold hand on her shoulder. "Don't tell me you think you can't do it now!"

"It's not a question of can or cannot," Hecate said in response. "All that matters is doing it and doing it right."

She inhaled deeply.

*Click.*

Action successful. New Branch: *Fire Emblem: Three Houses.* Anchor(s): Byleth/Sothis. Current Loopers: Byleth/Sothis.

Hecate let out a breath of relief. It felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Or a boulder.

Behind her, Nyarlathotep chuckled. Hecate joined in, looking at the screen. "Man, you wouldn't believe how long that's been on my mind. Thanks for the push."

Nyarlathotep paid her no mind, continuing to chuckle. A second mouth sprouted along his throat, causing the snickering to double in volume.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up." Hecate rolled her eyes. "It *is* pretty funny to think a Mythos Hacker actually helped."

Beside her, the chuckling grew into full-scale laughter, with Nyarlathotep spreading his arms wide like he was giving a speech. Like he was performing onstage. Tears of amusement streamed down his face, dropping to the floor and sizzling.

Hmm.

All of a sudden, Hecate didn't like this turn of events.

"Nyarlathotep," Hecate said lowly, "what is so funny?"

The Crawling Chaos cut off his laughter abruptly, turning his entire body to stare into Hecate's eyes. Both of his mouths were twisted into cruel sneers. "Oh, it would appear you finally noticed. You had the wool over your eyes for quite some time, hmm?"

"Nyarlathotep, what did you do?"

"What did *I* do?" Nyarlathotep patted her head condescendingly. " *I* didn't do anything. *You're* the one that just Activated that Branch. *That's* what's so funny." He gestured to the screen. "All I did was sell you on the details."

Hecate frowned. "Yes, and? Didn't you just get done saying I'm competent enough to handle it?" She crossed her arms. "And don't try saying I'm not. I know you weren't lying, I *am* objectively one of the more experienced Admins in Yggdrasil. It comes with the territory of having Activated over a dozen Branches."

"It's adorable how you think that will help you." Nyarlathotep stood up, slowly pacing around the room. "In all other cases, any issues a Branch may have had were purely technical. Fire Emblem: Awakening had glitchy data and a dangerous entity soulbound to the Anchor. Punch-Out had corrupted data and wildly unpredictable variables. Pikmin's primary Anchor candidate was non-sentient. In all

these cases, your skill as an Admin let you solve the problem. And that's why it was so easy to fool you into thinking this case would be the same.

"You're not used to dealing with emotional problems, are you?" Nyarlathotep stopped on his heel, turning his head just enough to look at Hecate from the corner of his eye. "Yes, for a long time you didn't care about your Loopers at all. You thought them mere mortals. Below your notice, made for just their universe's stability and to be your entertainment while you ate lunch."

"I'm not like that anymore," Hecate protested. "I care about my Loopers."

"I never said you didn't. But back to my point... You're not used to thinking about the emotional problems of your Loopers when Activating Branches. You never even considered it, did you?"

Hecate blinked. "Their... emotional problems?"

"Let me spell it out for you, o foolish Goddess of Magic." Nyarlathotep's primary mouth settled into a smug grin, while the mouth on his throat continued on. "You just Activated a loop where the Anchor is a teacher that has to go to war against her own students. It's almost as emotionally destabilizing as Warhammer, but you didn't spare that a single momentary thought."

The Mythos Hacker took great pleasure in watching Hecate's eyes shift. First narrowed in contemplation, then slightly widened in realization, and finally the contracted pupils as Hecate reeled back in horror.

"And on top of all that," he continued gleefully, "there's still so many *other* problems too. Like Those Who Slither in the Dark, or the pesky Divine Pulse. Time magic of any kind is usually tricky to deal with. Are you going to patch it? Will you have the time to spare?"

"You knew," Hecate whispered. "You knew all about this Branch. All this time, you were pretending to be clueless..."

"...To make you drop your guard," Nyarlathotep finished. "In comes Nyarlathotep, the bumbling irritation. Talking your ears off about Minecraft and mispronouncing Emblem as Enblem. Surely he's just being annoying, and you don't have to worry about him trying anything sneaky. You can listen to his words, accept the poisoned honey he's pouring into your ears. That's what you were thinking." He tutted. "Admit it, Mother of Angels. I sang the song you wanted to hear, and you danced to my tune. I played you like a fiddle."

"I..." Hecate shook her head, glaring at Nyarlathotep. "There will be consequences for this, you know."

Nyarlathotep's pompous smile grew twice as wide, creeping up his face with the appearance (and sound) of cracking glass. "A punishment? I fear no punishment from the fools called gods in this broken tree. Pain, such a lovely motivator but oh so temporary. Labor, an excuse to spread more mania. And besides, what will you tell the others? That you fell for Nyarlathotep's schemes? That you Activated the Branch with your own two hands?"

Hecate was silent. The only sound was the buzzing of the monitors around them.

"I've clearly given you a lot to think about," Nyarlathotep said. "And so, I am off. You'd best get to work figuring out what to do. I will say this, though: I believe I've won this encounter."

Hecate still said nothing, simply glowering at Nyarlathotep as he slid out of her room. Even as he was crossing the doorway, he continued to stare at her, unblinkingly, until he slithered out of sight.

Almost immediately, Hecate groaned, placing her head in her hands. She... no, she had nobody to blame but herself. She should have known he was up to no good. He was *always* up to no good.

But no, she let herself be picked apart. It was as he said. She was played like a fiddle.

*...You just Activated a loop where the Anchor is a teacher that has to go to war against her own students...* his voice laughed in her head. ... *All I did was sell you on the details...*

Hecate groaned again, letting her head fall backwards in her chair. Everything he said was true. Most of her Branches were at least *somewhat* cheerful, so she wasn't used to considering emotional stability as a factor. And once he'd begun prodding her, she'd forgone patience and reason in the allure of a new Branch to work on.

Bastard though he was, he had a point.

*...I presume this is your attempt at increasing your list of properties for yourself? Adding one measly Branch to the pile so you can inflate your ego ever higher...*

"Shut up," Hecate muttered. "Shut up."

She laid herself back in her chair for a moment, before sitting up reluctantly. "Gotta clean up my mess now," she sighed. "Gotta lie in the bed I made." She thought for a moment. "I'll deal with Byleth's emotional status later. First thing first, the Divine Pulses. Gotta lock them to this Branch, and patch them for now so I can figure them out better..."

Slowly, almost lethargically, Hecate made her way through the menu on her monitor with her Joycons. She'd have to make it so the Divine Pulses be taken out of the Branch, much like any other Read-Only ability. She'd also have to prevent the Divine Pulse from letting Byleth and Sothis return to a time before their Awakening in any given loop, and it'd be a good idea to temporarily make Byleth unable to use it to reverse their own death. Fortunately, as a Branch with a video game-based backup, it was one of the few where death of the Anchor wasn't a crash condition. She'd keep the event with

Kostas in the beginning of the loop as an exception, since that was the only one hard-coded into the backup.

She finished navigating the terminal to fix the pulses, and sat back again, staring blankly at the screen. Only a few seconds went by before she began cursing herself again.

*...Admit it, Mother of Angels. I sang the song you wanted to hear, and you danced to my tune...*

"What do I do..." she moaned. "What have I done..."

*...It's almost as emotionally destabilizing as Warhammer...*

"Warhammer..."

The Goddess of the Crossroads rested there for a moment, before shifting slightly. "Warhammer."

Warhammer 40,000 was notorious among Admins. It was one of the deadliest, most crapshoot Branches out there. And its Loopers were very well known- the Chaos Gods were troublemakers to their core, whether by intention or coincidence. Its Admin, Fenrir, was one of the most talented in the bunch to be able to wrangle that universe into submission.

Its Anchor, Leman Russ, was hardy. But by all accounts, he should not have been stable enough to successfully Anchor the world of Warhammer. He was only stable enough...

"Because of an early Fused Loop."

Very early on, Warhammer had a Fused Loop with Equestria, another well known Branch. One of the Loopers, Fluttershy, had provided enough emotional support that Leman could Activate without issue. The early Fused Loop had given Leman enough stability that he otherwise wouldn't have had.

Hecate sat up so fast she nearly got a headache, leaning towards her terminal. "If I can arrange an early Fused Loop," she reasoned out loud, "it can hopefully provide Byleth with more emotional stability. Enough to handle the Branch."

She wasn't aiming for the exact solution that Warhammer had, since that resulted in Leman Russ becoming fairly dependent on Equestria. This resulted in a higher amount of Fused Loops between the two Branches. That wasn't a problem of itself, though it wasn't ideal either. Plus, Fluttershy had visited Warhammer before the Branch Activated at all.

What Hecate wanted was an early Fused Loop that would ensure Byleth and Sothis got the Speech early, so they didn't get any bad ideas in their heads. Such an early Fused Loop might result in slightly more common Fused Loops between the two Branches, but nowhere near dependency.

"It'll be best if the Fused Loop takes the form of a Looper visiting Fódlan," Hecate mused. "That way Byleth doesn't have to deal with unfamiliar scenery on top of everything else." She briefly considered Smash Bros, Fire Emblem: Heroes, or Fire Emblem: Warriors, before deciding against it. There'd be time to meet Loopers from their own Cluster later- what she needed now was someone *specifically* good at dealing with emotional situations like this.

But who?

She thought about scheduling a loop with Equestria or Remnant, but shook her head. Those two Branches already had a good chunk on their own plates. And as much as Twilight or Weiss would help, they had their own problems, she was sure.

Nyarlathotep's voice danced through her mind again, a teasing lilt.

*...The Doki Doki Literature Club has caught my eye as of late. That's the Branch that Ganesha handed off to Psyche, by the by... Sayori is remarkably skilled at solving emotional problems...*

Hmm.

That could work.

Hecate picked up her Joycons again, chuckling. It wasn't in Nyarlathotep's nature to be helpful, and yet, entirely by accident, he had given her everything she needed.

"You want an epic Fused Loop, huh?" Hecate thought back to her conversation with Nyarlathotep, and how he bemoaned how 'boring' the Literature Club had become. "I guess you're getting just that."

The Goddess considered sending a message to Psyche to request a Fused Loop, but decided against it. Time was of the essence; this is no time for asking permission. Besides, she had learned long ago that one can ask permission or forgiveness, and that it was rarely useful to request the former.

Schedule Fused Loop between *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* and *Doki Doki Literature Club!* ?

Fused Loop format: Looper visiting *Fire Emblem: Three Houses.* Chosen Looper: Sayori.

**(+) Yes (-) No**

*Click.*

Are you sure?

**(+) Yes, schedule it (-) No, don't**

With a good natured eye roll, Hecate mashed the + button for a few seconds, before sitting back in her chair. She had done her part; all that was left was to ensure nothing went wrong.

"I promise, Byleth," Hecate said out loud. "I'll give you something to believe in."

## 1.2 Back at the Beginning (by KaiserRichard)

[Fire Emblem Three Houses]

Byleth looked around. He in a void with nothing but a stone throne and a "young" girl on said chair. Usually, said girl was sleeping and only just woke up, if he (or was it she?) began the path down becoming a Professor and then the Enlightened One. But it seems this time the girl; the Goddess Sothis, was waiting.

"Huh. How did we get back here?" Sothis asked Byleth. "I thought that we fused and became as one?"

The now male thought for a moment "Wasn't it not you? Did you pull the strings of time to bring me back here?"

Sothis shook her head. "I do not believe it was me who changed the hands of time."

"If not you, then whom?"

"That, I do not know. It as if I only have a limited control on time and something even larger than me is broken. As if I was just one clock in a shop full of them."

The young man blinked. He has felt he has been down this path before, at least 4 times. Perhaps it was some sort of time loop he is trapped in. But if the Goddess of Time says she didn't cause it, then who? "Then, what should I do this time?"

"That is up to you. But one suggestion I would make is to try not to use my powers of times as often. And don't fall into that void trap, I want to see what happens if we don't fuse as one."

Byleth nodded, Sothis was feeling sleepy once again hearing her yawn and slowly close her eyes

"YAWN. It is almost time to begin."

"For yet another time, it seems."

### 1.3 Aureate Sun, Part One (by Tetradrachm)

[Fire Emblem: Three Houses] / [Doki Doki Literature Club!]

Sayori Woke Up by actually waking up in a rather plain cot, which was a pretty good sign right off the bat that this wasn't a Baseline Loop. She immediately Pinged—or rather, tried to and failed, which meant Null Loop.

Well, they'd all been through a super long string of Baseline runs since Psyche took over, probably because she was still learning the ropes of Administering their Branch. The reconstruction of...her childhood friend (she preferred to not refer to him by any name in particular until he Looped and chose one) into a real person had taken up all of their attention for a while, and it was still such a wonderful thing, but his inconsistency was frustrating. He really needed to Activate and stabilize, bark it all. Anyway, they had all been getting bored, so she was excited that they all might get the chance to have a new adventure here! Possibly—hopefully—he would be here as well!

She decided to investigate her rather sparse room while she waited for her Loop Memories to kick in. The sunlight just barely beginning to peek into the room didn't reveal much; only a sparse few personal belongings, maybe, messily arranged around the stone chamber—

—if only it were a prison cell, to hold a wretch like her—

Sayori froze, that old, terrible, sick feeling of emptiness roiling through her. She shut her eyes carefully and took a deep breath. Absent the usual comfort of the Force to reinforce herself, it took a little longer than usual, but she used her usual meditation to re-center herself anyway, recall her faith in herself and her goals—

—to continue to avoid every human she could, to seek mercy from the goddess, and, if she were so blessed, to continue helping the

animals around the monastery.

Sayori exhaled, letting her lips buzz out as it suddenly clicked. This depression came from her Loop Memories, not her own mind. She had long since come to terms with her own self-loathing, while in this world...

Her gut clenched. Blood magic, or something like it, was the root issue here, her lineage in this world having granted her the magical "Crest" of a supposed monster. Blood magic never worked out well—she'd studied enough records of Sith Alchemy both from Baseline and Loops experiments to be sure of that. In this world—Fódlan—it seemed to be a fundamental part of the dominant feudal society, of which she was now suddenly a part.

Her name in this world, she remembered now, was Marianne von Edmund, and with her name came a slew of information that only raised more questions. A lot of potentially nasty questions, too. If this was an adventure, she suspected it was going to be a complicated one.

—

Sayori found she had a bit of a strange reputation around her new home. Her fellow students—it was a military school in which she'd Awoken, it turned out—did double takes and even gasped when she greeted them as she toured the beautiful monastery campus before classes started that morning. Her own Loop Memories made it obvious why: she'd barely ever said two words before to anyone else on campus when it wasn't absolutely necessary.

Her own house's members were especially surprised; one pink-haired girl, Hilda, openly goggled at her when she said hello, hands almost limp at her sides. "You're in a good mood today, aren't you?" Hilda asked.

"I guess so," Sayori said, smiling as brightly as she could without coming off as suspicious. Marianne was by nature an incredibly shy

and passive girl, at sharp odds with her own personality, so she naturally struggled to act the same way. She'd decided to pretend as if she were gradually coming out of her shell, but apparently it was a bit too sudden for Hilda. "I just...had a good night's rest."

Hilda laughed, her long twin tails bobbing behind her. "I do know how nice a good sleep can be! Beats most of the work and classes we have here, that's for sure."

If there was one thing Sayori knew about Hilda from Marianne's memories, it was that she was profoundly—almost performatively—lazy.

"That's why I'm hoping that new student doesn't join our house—I met her earlier," Hilda continued. "She's got this kinda intensity around her, since she's been a mercenary all her life, apparently. She'd probably try and make all her classmates work harder." She pouted.

Right, the new student. In between everyone being shocked that she could talk—one student had apparently thought she was a ghost before, even—the other gossip swirling around the school that morning had centered on the brave young woman who had rescued the three houses' leaders just the night before. This Byleth was apparently the daughter of one of the greatest Knights of Seiros to have ever existed—an impressive feat, Sayori gathered, although what she knew about both the Knights and the Church to which they were sworn gave her all kinds of icky feelings. Given that Jeralt had apparently gone to great lengths to raise her outside of the Church, it's possible he and his daughter had similar thoughts. She'd need to look into the potential "transfer student."

She could look into Byleth right now, she realized with a start, as the woman in question appeared in the doorway and glanced over her and Hilda both, expression oddly blank.

"Hello again!" Hilda waved at her.

"Oh, hello!" Sayori said cheerfully, but carefully modestly, and waved with a quick flip of her arm. "I'm Marianne von Edmund, it's good to meet you!"

Byleth stared at her for a moment with a faint expression of surprise, saying nothing. Had she done something wrong? After a moment, the woman nodded and said in a low voice, "It is...good to meet you as well." She continued watching Sayori intently for a moment, almost as if she were studying her, before nodding again in farewell and taking off down the hall.

"Wonder what that was all about?" Hilda asked a bit too casually. "Something about you really surprised her. You sure you haven't met her before?"

Sayori shook her head, at a bit of a loss herself. She had never seen the blue haired woman in her life, or any previous life—although something about her appearance rang a bell—but it seemed like the opposite might not have been true. It was just another question to add to her growing list.

At least, it was until that night, when it was announced that Byleth would actually become the new professor for the Golden Deer, her house, and she spent the whole announcement staring at Sayori.

Something was definitely up with Byleth.

### 1.4 Aureate Sun, Part Two (by Tetradrachm)

The matter came to a head much faster than Sayori had expected, early the next morning as she wandered the monastery before classes started again.

Or rather, a point. The point of a knife.

Sayori glanced down at the dagger Byleth was very nearly jabbing into her chest, pinning her against the wall, and then asked with

innocent confusion, "Is this some kind of surprise training, Professor?"

Byleth's face was unnaturally blank as usual, but a slight tension behind her eyes hinted at some sort of strong emotion—anger? Fear? Sorrow? "Who are you, really?" she snarled, jabbing the blade ever so slightly closer to her heart.

A suspicion bubbled up in Sayori's mind. More than one, actually, but the first one was most urgent. "I'm...not acting the way you expected, right?" she asked carefully. "Like...from other times all of this has happened before?"

Byleth's eyes widened, and her grip on the dagger wobbled for a moment. "How do you know about that?" she asked. Then she took on an odd, distant look, as if she were listening for something.

That...was not the usual answer new Loopers would have to that question. Sayori's mind raced—was Byleth not Looping after all? "Have you lived through coming to the Monastery before, Professor?" she asked carefully. If she screwed up here, she could—maybe, probably—fight her way out of this. All of the MMA, karate, and other martial arts she'd done with the girls over the years, mostly to stave off boredom, made her an expert compared to most any non-Looper. That is, assuming Byleth wasn't magically enhanced somehow.

Byleth snapped out of her contemplation, and nodded slowly. "I have." She paused. "Are you...a goddess?"

Sayori blinked, and blushed. "Fir no! I'm just a person—well, a really, really old person—I can explain?" she finished with a hopeful grin.

Slowly, Byleth lowered the dagger.

—

"Time repeats...beyond this universe entirely," Byleth muttered a few minutes later, that strange glazed look on her face again. They'd headed out to the lake for this conversation—apparently it was one of the safer places in the Monastery to hide from eavesdroppers. Given the dagger, it was clearly more than mercenary paranoia on Byleth's part.

"Yes, exactly," Sayori said. She'd practiced giving the Speech a few times with the girls—which reminded her, she really needed to figure out where they were this Loop—and she was glad she had; it was tricky to try and get the idea across the cultural divide. For one thing, Byleth had been oddly insistent that Sayori must be some sort of goddess to be able to travel through time until she explained that she wasn't the one causing it.

"That explains why you're...different," Byleth said after a moment.

"Different personality-wise?" Sayori asked. "Yeah, I'm not exactly like Marianne, you don't need to be to Loop in as someone—"

"No," Byleth interrupted her. "You look different than her entirely."

"Really?" Sayori glanced down at her reflection in the lake. "I just look the same as I always do back home, I guess...hmm..." Her Loop Memories didn't recall anyone who looked like the other members of the Literature Club. Maybe she actually was all alone here this Loop?

"Yes, not like the others who—" Byleth cut herself off abruptly, and then sighed.

"Others? Like the eavesdroppers you're worried about?"

"Yes," Byleth nodded soberly. "Infiltrators, from a group that wants to destroy the church and conquer Fódlan. They shapeshift, and take the guises of people they've disposed of."

Sayori gasped. "Oh, that's awful! Have they already done it this time?"

"Before I arrived at the Monastery, yes. And...the first time, one of them killed my father, and then...me, later, I suppose. That's when I woke up back here at the beginning of it all." Byleth looked utterly crestfallen, the most emotion she'd shown by far. "I've avoided it since then, but...they've defeated us every time since. That is why I threatened you earlier. My apologies, I thought you were one of them."

"I'm so sorry!" Sayori cried, lunging forward and hugging Byleth. The professor froze under the hug—all at once in a rush of embarrassment Sayori remembered that medieval feudal societies didn't really go for hugs—but then awkwardly returned it.

"I shouldn't have done that," Sayori said hastily as she pulled back. "Back on my world we hug more often—but I just felt so bad that you're just a new Looper and had to go through that, and, and you looked so sad!"

"It's fine, I understand. Thank you, Mari...Sayori." She looked a little uncomfortable—well, very slightly uncomfortable—but she offered up a faint smile, and Sayori took that as a win.

"I promise, we'll keep everyone alive this time." Byleth seemed like a brand new Looper by her attitude. Strange that the Branch would have a Fused Loop so soon, then...maybe it was a deliberate choice on the part of its Admin? "Not just that, but stopping the infiltrators too, I'm sure we can stop them! From the conquering part, I mean. The church..." Sayori trailed off uncertainly. It sure didn't seem like the church was good either, especially considering how tyrannical it seemed to be against dissidents. It was more the sort of thing Monika might have raged against, but she didn't particularly like what she knew of the Church either.

"The church is not perfect, no," Byleth admitted. "Far from it. But...a friend of mine can help with that."

"A friend?" Sayori asked.

Byleth looked distinctly uncomfortable even as she spaced out again. "You're sure?" she muttered under her breath; it didn't seem as if it were directed to Sayori herself. After a moment, she glanced up. "I need to explain something of my own."

—

"To sum it up," Sayori said a few minutes, a bit nonplussed, "the goddess that created the entire world and that everyone in Fódlan worships literally lives in your head? And is Looping herself?" The goddess was the reason Byleth had had such a strange reaction to the idea of Sayori Looping, too—she had her own form of time reversal, albeit limited.

"Not everyone worships her, but most do," Byleth nodded. "She was...eager that I tell you."

"I...well, I get why you're the Anchor here now," Sayori laughed. "Or, Co-Anchors with Sothis, I guess. I wish I could talk to her directly."

Byleth paused—which Sayori now realized was her listening to Sothis. "She says...you speak to her in me. I don't know of any way to allow others to speak to her directly, though. She has been gaining strength with each Loop, though, so eventually she might be able to...well, we don't really know."

"That's really a shame. She could try and talk some sense into the church if you could really prove it was her."

"Rhea would believe it," Byleth declared firmly. "She already knows."

"Oh, right..." Birch, but there were so many little moving parts behind what was going on. "So, what's the game plan?"

"Sorry?" Byleth asked, brow furrowed.

"Uh, expression from home. What's your plan? How do we...solve everything? What do we need to do?"

"Solve everything?" Byleth looked uncertain. "It's difficult. Those Who Slither, the infiltrators, they have a lot of influence all across Fódlan. Even when we do defeat them, though, we've never been able to save everyone."

"When you're Looping, anything is possible! And...well, I follow a philosophy that strives for change and accomplishment wherever possible." Going any further into Pink Sith ideology would only confuse Byleth at this point. "If there's a way to fix...everything, help as many people as possible, even maybe the ones working with the bad guys, I have to try!" They were all just kids—she'd want to give them the benefit of the doubt before calling them irredeemable monsters.

She'd long since learned that practically no one was irredeemable.

Byleth considered that for a moment. "I see your point," she said. "In that case...we both need to know more. In my last few...Loops...I befriended my students, but not everyone I could every time. I just don't know enough about everyone. I suspect that if we did we might be able to resolve things peacefully."

"Really?" Sayori grinned widely. "Oh, that's amazing! I'm sure we can do it!"

Byleth smiled softly. "You're very encouraging."

Briefly, Sayori thought of Hiro...her very oldest friend. "I always try to be!"

**1.5 Aureate Sun Spot: Byleth (by Tetradrachm)**

"Hmph. I cannot say that I find the description of these Administrators to be very reassuring."

Sothis floated over to lean on the table which Byleth and Sayori were currently sharing, watching the former—and the only one who could actually see her—as she took notes. "Consider all of the gaping holes and inconsistencies in our own memories," the goddess continued bitterly, "not to mention the limitations they've clearly placed on my abilities!"

Byleth sighed and shook her head slightly. "We don't know that they caused it..." Their inability to use Divine Pulse outside of a few very specific moments—once at the beginning of the Loop, and once when Kronya attacked Jeralt if that still happened on schedule—had been one of their biggest unknowns before Sayori arrived, right behind the cause of time repeating entirely. It had been one of Byleth's biggest frustrations time and time again, not that she could often feel them all that strongly: that they might have had a way to save her slaughtered students and colleagues that they could not use.

"Given that I cannot think of any other reason why—" Sothis began, as the same time as Sayori jerked her head up and asked, "Oh, did Sothis say something?"

"Tell her!" Sothis urged Byleth, and with only the faintest stirring of irritation did she nod and turn to Sayori.

"Sothis suspects that it's our Administrator's fault that she cannot use her Divine Pulse very often." While it was mildly annoying to have to be the interpreter between Sothis and Sayori, Byleth was more than willing to give Sothis her first chance at directly talking to someone else that she'd had in a long, long time. She could tell—sense through their connection that neither of them completely understood—that Sothis enjoyed it, and that she genuinely liked Sayori. Byleth liked her too; she was friendly, optimistic, and empathetic, and her confidence gave Byleth hope that this time she and Sothis might actually live to see the end of the war with all of her charges alive and well.

It wasn't even a goal she'd firmly had before meeting Sayori; before then, she'd just been desperately hoping for answers—as much as she could, since each new Loop saw her emotions fade away again.

This repeat—erm, Loop—she'd actually been inspired enough to try and put some of her more complicated ideas for helping her students into action, like writing a letter to Lord Lonato before he could begin his rebellion. She hadn't heard back yet, but she was hopeful that she could save Ashe's father.

"Hmm..." Sayori considered this for a minute, tapping her quill against the table. "Well, first off, call 'em Admins for short, or else people will think you're too uptight." Sothis huffed, but in a light-hearted way. "Next, I wouldn't be surprised if that was true. Time travel magic is one of those really finicky things that the Admins put special preventions on. I don't know if that'll ever change for you or not...I'm sorry." She flashed Byleth a quick frown.

"It's alright," she answered, although a swell of disappointment bloomed in her chest. Well, that was something at least—more emotion was...good, in Byleth's opinion. She was always happier when it returned each loop.

"It's probably because you're getting closer to her," Sothis pointed out—she could always hear Byleth's thoughts—and then frowned sharply. "But alas! It may be that my divine power is forever locked away. If that is so...well, I could hardly bear it! I cannot speak to anyone but you and my one method of reaching out to the wider world is gone? What am I to do?" Sothis was genuinely distraught over this, and there was nothing Byleth could do. She could hardly even empathize all that deeply with her!

All she could do was sigh in response, and that was such a lackluster answer that she could almost hate herself for it. Try all she did, it was impossible to restore her ability to feel emotions any other way than giving it time each and every loop. It grated.

"What happened now?" Sayori asked, and Byleth steeled herself to answer. Instead, Sayori looked at her more carefully and furrowed her brow. "Are you...okay, Byleth?"

Byleth stared at her, at a sudden loss. She didn't have an answer, really. But perhaps that was an answer in and of itself. "Not really..."

"Aww, what's wrong?"

"Sothis is discouraged"—the goddess nodded vigorously, although her eyes were starting to get heavy in the way they did when she tired out—"and so am I," she admitted. "What can we do about the problems that the loops cause for us instead of solve?"

Now it was Sayori's turn to sigh. "Trust me, I've been there. All of my friends and I, we've all suffered because of looping. We're mostly getting better now, but...bah, that doesn't matter right now. The thing is, a lot of those problems just take time to solve. Time and out-of-Loop tricks, sometimes. Okay, so, Sothis feels frustrated because of her powers not working right..." She shifted her attention to the side of the desk where Byleth had told her Sothis was floating earlier. "Well, one thing that might help if you know is that you'll probably get some Variant powers that you'll be able to keep soon. Those are way more common than actual Fused Loops. One of them might even let you have a physical body!"

"How...wonderful..." Sothis yawned hugely and then slumped over onto the desk.

"She appreciates it," Byleth said hastily.

"Good! Now, what about you? What's bothering you?"

"Almost nothing," Byleth said tonelessly. "That's the problem."

"Why...oh! Your emotions, they're all suppressed, right. Shoot." Sayori picked up her quill and held it in her hand on her cheek, deep

in thought. "And you said that the cause was different each Loop, right?"

"Once Sothis was able to cut it off on her own as soon as we Woke Up, but usually she doesn't have direct control over it."

"Yeah, it's probably Loop Variable then. Darn." She nibbled on the back of her quill, lost in thought, but it tickled her nose and she immediately reared back into an unexpectedly huge sneeze. It echoed through their little corner of the library. Sothis was startled out of her nap, and Byleth snorted, even to her own surprise.

"Uh..." Sayori blushed bright red. "Sorry, I forgot I wasn't holding a pencil...uh, anyway, well, there are some ways to move your soul around out there in Yggdrasil, that might be able to temporarily separate you two enough to break the effect, like Shinigami badges from Bleach, or plain old astral projection—I know Steven and Finn over in the Cartoon Network Cluster are pretty good at it."

"Separate us?" Byleth asked uncertainly. "Would that be...safe?"

"I'm not sure," Sayori admitted. "Probably not, but if you ever meet one of the astral projector experts you could ask them...wait, how is it that it wears off normally?"

"That changes every time as well!" Sothis groused, already half awake again.

"We don't know for sure, but it has to do with Sothis waking up and regaining her strength. Well, that and possibly our time spent at the monastery, getting closer to the students and faculty...I had an isolated childhood," Byleth said awkwardly. It didn't help that almost everything about it was different each time too. Once she'd grown up almost entirely in Fódlan's Throat fighting off the Almyrans; another time it had been up in Galatea territory fighting against Sreng. The common thread was that Jeralt generally kept her isolated (not without cause), and she didn't have many friends until she arrived at Garreg Mach.

"Oh, that's really good then!" Sayori said cheerfully. "See, for one thing, every Looper's power grows a bit every single Loop, and that excess power does things like create the Pocket. But the thing is that it also can make you more powerful normally, so that means that eventually she'll be strong enough to be awake more, which will probably help keep your emotions active!"

Sothis hummed appreciatively, but she was mostly asleep by now.

"And the other thing is that if it really is your bonds with your friends that help, it'll probably make a big difference once they Activate! Then they'll remember their friendship with you and you won't have to work to build it all over again, right?"

"I guess so," Byleth said thoughtfully. The idea of her friends Looping was incredibly tempting—but it might be tricky too. What would they remember, exactly? Which repeat, which series of events would they know?

Still though, they were all smart people. Eventually they'd be able to sort through their possible issues if they Activated. She'd make sure of it.

**1.6 Aureate Sun, Part Three (by Tetradrachm)**

She really was alone here.

Or rather, as far as Sayori could tell none of the Loopers from her Branch had come with her to Fódlan. She'd been all over the Monastery, even—carefully—into Abyss beneath it, and hadn't seen anyone that looked or acted like her friends. It was possible they were scattered in other parts of the world, but she had no way of finding out where they might be. Being away from them stung; it always did, but especially badly in a Null, slow loop like this where she might find herself with nothing to do for hours on end and the darkness crept in at the edges.

So she threw herself into her project of helping everybody. She had daily "tutoring" sessions with Byleth where she taught her (them, actually, gender-variable) and Sothis about Yggdrasil and the regular concepts like the Ping and the Pocket. She couldn't actually show them how to do either, unfortunately, but at least they'd have the groundwork laid out for whenever they had their next Fused Loop.

It wasn't as difficult a challenge as Sayori would have thought to teach Byleth and Sothis about more technologically advanced worlds, at least; it turned out this world was a good deal more advanced than it appeared, with many inventions forbidden by the Church itself.

Monika would have convinced Byleth to start a revolution by now if she were in Sayori's place.

But Byleth still hoped to find a way to reconciliation without any war, and that meant stopping the Slitherers' plans as quickly as possible first. The trouble with that was that their plans were Loop Variable right up until they attempted to infiltrate the castle in a few months' time. Byleth had a plan to trap and expose them when one of them—Kronya—was supposed to be snuck into the monastery, and Sayori didn't mind waiting until then. It gave her the chance to get to know her classmates better, and hopefully help them with the struggles so many of them faced.

"Hey there, miss cheerful!"

And, occasionally, dealing with nosy house leaders.

"Hello, Claude," she called with a wave as she crossed the pavilion. She was headed for the library this morning, just as she had been every morning for the past few weeks. It turned out that Marianne's specialties were in certain types of light magic and in swordsmanship. It was an unusual combination to be sure, but fitting given what Byleth had told her about her Crest. It was oddly fitting that she was in a Fused Loop learning magic at a school again; the

last time she'd done a lot of magic was at Hogwarts. If only she could just solo the Slitherers the way she'd beat Voldemort...

"Hey!" he jogged up next to her. "Wait up! I wanted to ask you something! I'm glad that you've been, uh, feeling better lately, but I've been burning to understand why."

"Oh! Well...a lot of different things, I guess? I've settled in more here at the Academy, and it's been really great getting to know everybody better!"

"Sure, I get that, but you didn't really seem like the kind of person who wanted to get to know everybody better at first. You pretty much ran away from me the first time we met." He studied her for a second. "Had a difficult childhood, huh?"

She had had difficult childhoods in weird Fused Loops before, if that counted. Birch, in this Loop too. "You could say that..."

"Well, trust me, I know that feeling." He stretched his arms behind his head in an overly casual way. "But look at you now, coming out of your shell in spite of it all, like a baby bird seeing the world for the first time." She rolled that analogy around in her head for a moment, and his face fell slightly. "You like animals, right? I was going for an analogy you'd like."

Sayori cut him off with a giggle, a real one. "I do love animals, Claude." It was true. She already loved Dorte, her horse this Loop, very, very much. "And I do like your analogy! Coming to Garreg Mach has definitely been a brand new eggs-perience for me!"

Claude stared at her, mouth slightly open, then burst into laughter. "I was not expecting that! That was—that was great! Man, that's just what I meant, though. I was wondering, though—is some of it Teach?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, has she made you feel more comfortable here, too?"

"Definitely. She's taught me so much already, and she's been...really nice to me." Byleth really was a good person, sensitive and insightful. She'd quickly understood Yggdrasil, not to mention the watered down version of her personal backstory. Sothis seemed nice enough too, but a bit grumpier—chomping at the bit to not be stuck as a disembodied voice in someone else's head. Thankfully, the Loops had all sorts of solutions for that.

"I totally know what you mean. She's awesome." Claude paused, looking off into the distance in thought. "Right, thanks. I just wanted to check up on you, as part of my duty as House leader and all that." He winked. "I won't keep you any longer, I know you've got important studying to do. See ya!" He walked off with the same confident swagger he always had.

Sayori watched him leave for a moment. She was fairly certain that the real reason he'd been so curious about how she was doing was to get another opinion on Byleth. He was probably weighing his options as to how useful she might be in the future as an ally and whether he might eventually trust her; in spite of his apparent outgoing attitude it was clear he kept everyone at arm's length.

It came down to a difficult childhood, according to Byleth. Not that he was alone in that—sometimes it almost seemed like all of Fódlan ran on Freudian logic—but it did make her wish she could help him. That was Byleth's job, though, as his professor; she knew him and the other Golden Deer well enough by now to help them.

She was so lost in her thoughts as she entered the library that she didn't even spot its only other occupant at first. As she pulled out a chair to sit down, though, he sucked in a breath in surprise and looked up.

"Ah, Marianne," Dimitri said politely. "Good morning."

"Hello, Dimitri," she said with a nod. She knew he didn't like to be called "Your Highness," and that he was the very model of a modern modest prince, but beyond that she didn't really know him all that well. She certainly felt horribly sorry for him, though, from what Byleth had told her. To have been through so much, to suffer through mental illness because of it—it was awful. She shook off those morbid thoughts—this time!—and instead said, "I don't often see you here in the library."

"No," he laughed, "I suppose I'm not in here often. You would know; you're here almost every day, are you not?"

"Yeah, actually," she said, taken a bit aback that he had even noticed. "Well, here in the mornings when I don't have lectures or classes, and then afternoons in the training grounds—"

"Well, I have seen you there, of course," he said with a smile. "Sparring with Ignatz, and Ingrid, and once Felix, I recall."

"Oh, no, you saw my spar with Felix?" She was slightly tempted to bury her face in her hands. "He only fought me once because of how badly he beat me!" Granted, she'd handicapped herself a bit due to trying to follow the sword-fighting style of Fódlan as opposed to the lightsaber forms she usually used, but Felix was a hell of a fighter.

"Your technique is very good for someone just starting out!" he protested. "You have nothing to be ashamed of, I assure you."

"Thanks. Well, you're quite the duelist yourself, especially with that spear."

"Well, I've been training with it for...quite some time, now." He glances down at his hands. "It's very important to me," he said softly.

She knew just why it was so important to him, too; the Tragedy of Duscur, and all it entailed. She knew more about it than he did, a fact that twisted her stomach in the wrong way. Suddenly desperate to

change the subject, she asked, "So, what were you doing here in the library, anyway?"

"Oh, I was just checking some old financial records. I was curious about...donations to the church. It says that my step-uncle, Lord Arundel, completely stopped donating a few years ago, and I am uncertain why."

Crap, she knew why—Arundel was one of the Slitherers now. And she hadn't realized he was Dimitri's uncle! She couldn't tell him because it might send things off the rails, and that was too big of a risk to take with the Slitherers still at large. But it was another member of his family lost to him...

She couldn't just say nothing. "People...change, sometimes. And sometimes, they're never who you thought they were in the first place." Unbidden, thoughts of her first friend came to mind. He changed every Loop now, so completely different sometimes that she couldn't even think of him as the same person. She almost always had Loop Memories of him as her dear friend, but the nature of that relationship was so variable that she felt alienated from every version of him now.

She didn't know what to think of that.

"I suppose you're right," Dimitri said, cutting off her train of thought. "He does seem a changed man, these days. Everyone changes, really." He looked up at her. "But that isn't always a bad thing."

"No?"

"No," he shook his head. "It's just a fact of life. All we can do is try to make the best of it, and right wrongs as best we can."

"What about...when you can't right a wrong?" she was compelled to ask. "When there's nothing you can do?"

He stared her in the eyes. "There's always something you can do. As long as you live, you can act. I'd go so far as to say that you have to act." Almost under his breath, he repeated, "You have to."

It wasn't often that someone that didn't know her well hit on a deep conviction Sayori held, but in that moment Dimitri did just that. To always act if you can—that was a core tenet of Pink Sith philosophy.

He was right, she knew it down to her bones, and in that moment she decided to act now as well; she would save him from his Baseline fate however she could.

### 1.7 Aureate Sun Spot: A Sleepless Night (by Skaz Wolfman)

In his dormitory room in the monastery of Garreg Mach, Prince Dimitri Alexandre Blaiddyd of the Holy Kingdom of Faerghus was tossing and turning in his bed. It happened, some nights, that four year old memories would creep into his thoughts. He had nightmares so vivid that even when he awoke the sounds of people dying rang in his ears, the scent of blood and smoke lingered in his nose...and he could swear he saw their ghosts. Cold sweat soaked his night clothes, leaving him feeling so chilled he had to wonder if he, himself, was a ghost trapped in an endless delusion. The only sense that wasn't haunted was his sense of taste, which he had lost entirely.

There was nothing to be done but wander the monastery at night, like the ghost he sometimes wondered if he was, and hope the cool night air would clear his head. When an hour of such aimless wandering brought no relief, he turned his feet toward the training hall. He'd grab the heaviest blunted training weapon he could find and...exhaust himself. His nightmares couldn't rob him of sleep if he was too tired to think, let alone remember, right?

He knew very well that didn't always work, but it was the best he could think to do at the moment. It worked, sometimes, at least. If all else failed, he could (with great reluctance) see if Dedue was losing sleep tonight. He hated to bother his friend, but he was the only one

who...who understood the nightmares. And while Dedue wasn't the best conversationalist, he was a great listener.

Dimitri grit his teeth as he neared the training hall, because the phantasmic din of battle was starting to get louder in his ears. As if his ghosts could sense him trying to escape them, and were redoubling their infernal efforts to ruin his fragile peace of mind out of spite. But wait...no…Dimitri frowned, as an unfamiliar voice reached his ears. It sounded like a woman. A young woman. Not like any of the knights who had perished with his parents. Was this voice real?

He slowed his approach and lightened his steps, creeping closer to the training dummies. He peeked around the corner, and his eyes widened in shock.

By the guttering light of a torch, he beheld none other than Marianne von Edmund, a student from the Golden Deer House, assaulting a training dummy with a sword. Well, 'assaulting' was a...kind of a weak word, Dimitri thought, for what he was seeing. She was savaging it, hacking and slashing and ripping and tearing into the stuffed, padded, and lightly armored dummy. Every few swings, she let out an incoherent snarl of...anger? Frustration? Pain? It was a feeling Dimitri recognized, but couldn't give an exact name.

Abruptly, Marianne twirled from one thoroughly ruined dummy to the one next to it, running it through in the same motion before yanking her sword free and starting over. The sword didn't come free, though, and she kept yanking at it. Finally, she lifted one leg and planted it against the dummy's chest, and pulled her sword free with a mighty pull and a roar of effort. And as soon as it did, Marianne was forced to jump backwards on one leg, flailing wildly until she fell backwards with all the grace of a dead goose in freefall. Her sword flew out of her hand, scoring off of a pillar and spraying sparks into the gloom.

Dimitri sprang forward from his unintentionally-hiding place.

When Sayori's head struck the stone floor, she very distinctly heard 'Hiroaka' yelling "Sayori, you dummy! Be more careful, I can't put you

back together if you get all busted up."

She was having trouble sleeping; Null Loops made it harder for her to manage her depression, and besides that she was stressing about helping Byleth cope with the imminent war and keeping her students alive. So, she figured she would go for a midnight stroll to clear her thoughts. She wound up near the training hall, and decided on a whim to get in some after-hours sword practice.

She needed to adapt the combat forms Pinkie had taught her so she could better use them with metal swords. She needed to earn Felix's respect so she could help Byleth mend his and Dimitri's friendship; just one of many steps to take to unite the students of Garreg Mach into a cohesive front. Sayori firmly believed that there was nothing stronger than a unified group of people, who trusted and cared for each other, working toward a common goal.

Sayori didn't like violence. She hated it, in fact. But in her Sith training, she had learned how to use it. Even if it weren't a Null Loop, Sayori didn't think she had the power to nonviolently end the threat Byleth had described to her. So she had to hone her violent skills, so she could be helpful.

She had only meant to practice her forms, but as she exerted herself her heart started beating faster, adrenaline started coursing through her system, and instead of tiring out she felt more awake. The muddled, indistinct thoughts that had been merely keeping her awake were crystalizing. But this kind of clarity only made her more frustrated. All the social networking she was doing, trying to strengthen the bonds between the other students, for whatever reason was making her think of her old...her best friend, she kept reinforcing to herself.

Sayori was used to dealing with her own depression, but looking back on her memories as 'Marianne', and recalling Marianne's irrational self-loathing, gave her a new sense of appreciation for how far she, herself, had come since she had started Looping. The same could be said for her friends, Monika, Yuri, and Natsuki. Well, Monika

still left a lot to be desired, but Sayori knew she would get there eventually. Her and her friends had all come so far, and grown so much…

All but the friend dearest to her heart. The one she missed the most. Since the Refactoring, he was more….personable, then he used to be. But unless-until, she firmly thought at herself-he started Looping, he couldn't grow and change with them. Every loop, he went back to who he used to be, except some loops his personality was completely randomized! It was so damned frustrating! She had worked so hard to make everything better for everyone, and while she wasn't exactly doing it for the Tree's sake, she knew that the Tree benefitted from her keeping her friends stable...but she still didn't have the only thing she wanted from the Tree. She was doing her best to be patient...but she wasn't a very patient person, really, and patience was not a virtue Pinkie had emphasized in their training.

Sayori wasn't sure when it happened, but at some point her training routine had gotten sloppier and sloppier, making her more and more frustrated until…

The training hall echoed with the 'Crack!' of her head bouncing off the stone floor. White lightning bolts of pain screamed up and down her nerves, driving every other thought and feeling out of her senses. Instinctively, she curled up into a tight ball and started crying, clutching the back of her head. She had already been close to winded by her physical exertions, and what little air had been in her lungs had been driven out when she hit the floor. Now she felt like she couldn't breathe at all, and she couldn't concentrate to compose herself because her skull felt like it had split in half.

Tears swam from her eyes, which burned so badly that she couldn't keep them open. Little by little, Sayori drew in enough breath to start cursing herself. "Dummy...clumsy...stupid...graceless...idiot…" she hissed even as she tried to restablish her regular breathing.

"Enough of that," said a deep, masculine voice from very nearby.

'Dimitri?!' Sayori thought. Then she abruptly realized she was not on the floor. She was moving through the air, held by two very strong arms. She was being held so steadily that she could hardly tell she was being carried at all. 'Wow. He really is strong.'

"Um...where are we going?" she asked.

"The infirmary, of course. You took a very solid blow to the head, you could have a concussion," Dimitri informed her matter-of-factly. There was a familiar tension in his voice, and a familiar tightness in his expression.

Sayori's first, reflexive thought was that it was exasperation, as her old friend would express whenever she hurt herself. But no, she intuited that it wasn't directed at her. There was a preoccupation to it. It was reminiscent of when Monika would throw herself into some problem so she didn't have to think about something else.

"Uh, I know you're being gentlemanly and all, but I can walk to the infirmary," Sayori said meekly, "I didn't hurt my legs."

Dimitri gave no notice of her words. His attention seemed...elsewhere. Sayori sighed, and decided not to press the issue. She could tell that he was, in part, helping her so he didn't have to think about something else. Thanks to Byleth, she was pretty sure she knew what that 'something else' was. After all, he must have been in or very close to the training hall when she fell, probably for reasons similar to why she was there, losing her cool and wailing on training dummies like they owed her money.

Some nights, when she didn't have a date, Professor Manuela was known to hang out in the infirmary after dark, usually with a book or some things she needed to grade for her class, just in case. Tonight was not one of those nights, and Sayori couldn't help but feel a little relieved. She didn't really feel like explaining how she had gotten herself into this situation.

'Probably going to have to at least explain to Dimitri what I was up to, though,' she decided. Funnily enough, thinking of explaining herself to him didn't seem to bother her as much. 'Well, even if it's not strictly his business, leaving him in the dark after he brought me to the infirmary and all would be pretty rude,' she reasoned.

Dimitri gently sat her down on one of the beds. "Stay here, I'll go get Professor Manuela," he said as he straightened up and moved toward the door.

"What?! No!" yelped Sayori, jumping up to her feet to stop him...and then immediately sinking to her knees as the throbbing ache in her head surged to a crescendo. Still, she was expecting the pain this time, so she had the presence of mind to stop her fall by slapping a hand on the floor. She immediately made herself stand up again, using a mental exercise Pinkie had taught her to convert the pain into motive energy and sending it into her legs. 'Fire burns less when you gallop straight through, fire burns less when you gallop straight through, fire burns less when you gallop straight through.'

"No, don't wake her up...I'll be fine, I don't think I'm concussed, and even if I am I know how to deal with it myself. Please don't bother her."

"You could have a skull fracture," said Dimitri sternly, "Or burst blood vessels in your brain, even. And if you are concussed, you most certainly shouldn't be attempting to cast any kind of magic. Especially not healing magic on yourself; you could make things worse."

'Big surprise, there...NO! Bad Sayori, stay positive!' Sayori sighed and grabbed Dimitri's arm. "Please, I will be fine. There's no need to disturb other people on my account."

Dimitri frowned. "Why do you do that, Marianne?" he asked.

Sayori blinked. "Do...what? Be considerate of others?" she asked.

"Downplay your own value," Dimitri sighed. "It seems everytime I see you you're doing for others and asking nothing in return."

"Yeah, that's how I do," Sayori agreed. "Does that...bother you?"

"Not in principle, but the degree to which you do it worries me. It's all good and well to be charitable, but it's okay to let others help you in turn. It...isn't wrong to have your own moments of selfishness. You're only human."

Sayori's stomach clenched. This discussion felt very familiar...she had a similar one with her old friend, every Baseline loop after she revealed her depression to him. She gave a weary sigh, with an edge of frustrated anger to it. "You don't understand, my depression isn't the only reason I'm selfless; being selfless is what makes me happy, and it's not just that people doing things for me makes me uncomfortable, or anything. I don't like it. If I need help, I will ask for it, but I'm much happier being the helper."

Dimitri slowly blinked and cocked his head. "Your...what?"

Sayori blinked back at him. "My what what?"

"You...you just said that you're depressed," he said, very seriously.

'Oh fluffmunchkins, I said the D word, didn't I?'

"What do you have to be depressed about?" Dimitri asked, "Has anyone been causing you distress? Have you gotten bad news from home?"

Sayori gave another agitated sigh, and her headache intensified, which only made her irritation worse. "Dimitri," Sayori tried not to growl, "You're just trying to be kind, and I appreciate it...but right now, the only person causing me distress is you. I was already in a bad mood tonight, so just...just leave it be, please? I won't go to sleep, just in case I'm concussed, I'll stay up until Professor Manuela or

Professor Byleth wake up. But please, for the love of G...the goddess, please stop fussing over me I beg of you."

"I...I don't understand," said Dimitri, half-gawking.

"I know you don't, and it's not your fault," Sayori sighed, sitting back down on the bed and rubbing the back of her head. She froze, and brought her hand around so she could see it. There was a little blood on her fingers. Something about the sight of her blood dried up the last little bit of care she had for her demeanor, and her 'mask' fell off entirely. "Oh...fuck me," she muttered.

Dimitri now fully gawked at her. "M-Marianne!"

"Sayori," Sayori snapped. She stood up from the bed once more, and started out of the infirmary with an aggressive stride.

"What?" Dimitri asked as he ran to catch up with her in the corridor outside.

"Don't worry about it, Dimitri," Sayori groaned. "Just mind your own business."

"...very well, I will hold my tongue. But regardless of your feelings toward me, you have a serious injury and I'm not going to leave you alone until I've seen it tended to," Dimitri said firmly.

Sayori suddenly stopped short and pivoted to face Dimitri, holding a hand up. "You said I shouldn't try using magic with a head injury. I will cast Thoron on you if you don't leave me alone."

Dimitri's heart skipped a beat, and then started beating double-time. His eyes narrowed, and without thinking about it his hand found the hilt of the saber on his side, gripping it tightly. "I am very concerned for your current state, Marianne, but that is a very serious threat to make."

"I don't make threats, Your Highness. I make promises, and I'm very good at keeping them," Sayori said in an exhausted tone. Without waiting for him to respond, she dropped her hand and turned around, continuing on to the training hall.

A couple days later, Dimitri was back in the training hall doing drills with a training lance. He stopped to wipe the sweat off his forehead, and abruptly realized how quiet it was. Looking around, he realized everyone else who had been drilling with him had left. He chuckled a little, and started toward the exit. Then he saw 'Marianne.'

Sayori entered the training hall and made a beeline for the racks, where she picked out a pair of wooden swords. Then she approached Dimitri and underhand pitched a sword at him. It took him by surprise, but he still caught it easily enough. "Marianne?"

"EN GARDE!" Sayori suddenly yelled before dashing at him. Dimitri's eyes widened, and he moved reflexively to parry her initial strike.

"Marianne, what are you doing?!" he demanded.

"We parted ways on a...sour note, the other night," said Sayori as she backed up and settled into a guarding stance. "Wanted to apologize, but I've still got some aggression to bleed off, and you're better at fighting than talking about feelings and junk, so….APOLOGY FIGHT!" Sayori yelled before attacking him again.

Dimitri was fairly surprised. 'Marianne' had demonstrated a far, far higher degree of proficiency with the sword than he had ever seen from her before. She also used a highly unorthodox style. She typically kept her sword in one hand at a time, only putting her other hand on the hilt to change hands. Otherwise, she kept her non-sword arm way out, as if for balance. She didn't keep her feet in-line, like a fencer, either, she kept them widely spaced and square. To Dimitri, it seemed completely counterintuitive. She had no leverage, she was wide open, she had no guard to speak of, and everything Dimitri knew about swordfighting told him he should have trounced her handily.

Instead, he wasn't able to land a hit on her. Whenever he swung at her, she just wasn't there anymore. When she swung at him, he would move to parry, but then her wooden sword was coming at him from a different angle. It wasn't just that she was fast. Felix was much faster, and Dimitri could generally hold his own against him. No, the real trick was that he couldn't read her movements. Whatever he thought she was going to do, she did something else.

Still, her style had very little power behind it. If she had a sharp, metal sword that was light enough not to impair her movements, he'd be in serious danger of taking a hit to his vitals. But since she was wielding a wooden sword, and she could only swing it with so much force when she was one-handing it and constantly darting around erratically, so she was basically just whacking him with a stick. Hard enough to annoy him, but not enough to really hurt.

The fight came to an end when Sayori started running out of steam, and Dimitri smacked her weapon out of her hand, sending it flying across the room.

"Eheheh, good match?" Sayori asked.

Dimitri just grunted, and went to retrieve the fallen training weapon, and then returned both swords to the rack. He turned around and saw Sayori standing still, watching him curiously. "How does your head feel?" he asked.

"Fine. Really, it does," she assured him. "I'm sorry I got so mad at you. You weren't trying to be a pain, you were just trying to be helpful when I was in a bad mood."

"And what was it that put you in such a bad mood?" asked Dimitri, standing in front of her with his arms folded.

Sayori took a deep breath and sighed it out. "Nothing, exactly. I was just really feeling my depression that night. The way you were fussing over me brought up old, unhappy memories. But it's okay!

You had no way of knowing, you were just trying to be nice. I hit the end of my patience and lashed out at you, and I'm sorry."

"I'm still confused as to what you're depressed about. Is there anything I, or anyone, can do to help?"

Sayori's mouth twitched. "Not in the way you're thinking. It's just something I have to suffer through sometimes. If you want to help me through it, just be my friend. And don't make a huge fuss over me, I hate being fussed over," Sayori added, folding her arms. "It's like….if Dedue never stopped fussing over you, you'd get sick of it too."

Dimitri looked up, thinking back on all the times Dedue got carried away with the whole "loyal vassal" thing. While Dimitri realized that Dedue's loyalty and subservience was entirely appropriate, considering Dimitri himself was a noble, royalty even, and Dedue was not only commonborn but also owed Dimitri his life….Dimitri still found it frustrating, and missed when Dedue had known nothing of vassalhood and had just treated him like a good friend. If that was how Marianne felt when people bothered her about her feelings….he didn't quite understand her reasoning, but he supposed he could at least sympathize with that feeling.

"Very well. If that's how you feel, I shall do my best not to be a bother," Dimitri agreed.

"I could also use a sparring partner," Sayori added. "I need a good swordfighter to help me redefine my technique, and my classmates….kind of have a hard time giving me their best," she grumbled. "And the Professor isn't always available, of course."

Dimitri briefly imagined how he would feel if the other Blue Lions refused to give him their best during sparring matches, just because of his station. Some of them, like Ashe, actually did feel that way. "Certainly, I would be happy to help you….wait, 'redefine'? Don't you mean 'refine' your technique?"

"Yeah, that's what I said!" Sayori chirped.

And that was how Dimitri and Sayori became sparring partners for the rest of the loop.

### 1.8 Aureate Sun, Part Four (by Tetradrachm)

The entire monastery seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, but for Sayori the stress was only beginning. The plan she had created with Byleth was about to kick off, and a lot of things needed to go just right in rapid succession.

Flayn had been kidnapped and then recovered just a few hours ago in a harrowing battle beneath the school against the Death Knight. It was the most intense battle the Golden Deer had had so far, and Sayori was intensely glad for all the training she'd been putting in these past few months. She was the team's best sword fighter by now—Felix was far more interested in sparring with her these days—and a decent healer and light mage to boot. Still, she'd been more than willing to leave fighting Jeritza himself to Lysithea. She was the one that could knock him off his horse with one spell, after all.

Now Flayn was recuperating in her chambers, tended to almost viciously by Seteth, and Monica—who thankfully looked nothing like her Monika—had just been thrown a celebration in the Black Eagles' quarters before getting summoned by Rhea for questioning about her "ordeal." Byleth was busy rounding up as many of the Church officials and Knights of Seiros as she could find while Sayori tracked down Claude and Dimitri. It was critically important that every house was in on this—every house but the Black Eagles for now, that is.

"What's the new crisis, Marianne? Did Teach tell you?" Claude asked, a bit frustrated, as they hurried through a second story hallway toward Rhea's chambers.

"Sort of. Hopefully, we're gonna stop it before it happens!" She tried to inject as much cheer into her voice as she could, but after the

battle she was mostly just exhausted, same as him. It was a good thing that this next part would be quick—either way.

At least Dimitri seemed well-rested. "Have we tracked down the Death Knight again?" he asked, deadly serious.

"Not yet," she replied as they finally reached the door. "Okay, both of you get your weapons ready. There might be a fight right away!"

"In Rhea's chambers?" Claude asked dubiously. "Sheesh, talk about a crisis."

Nonetheless, both house leaders lifted their weapons and she opened the door. Inside, Rhea and Monica turned towards them in confusion as Sayori lifted her hand and recited the spell she'd been running through her head all day to be sure she got it right on the first try. The spell shot out of her hands, washed over Monica, and she was briefly frozen in place as her disguise faded.

Rhea gasped in horror and stumbled back. "You..." she growled. "Marianne? What is this?"

"She's a spy!" Sayori cried. The now revealed Kronya, visibly overwhelmed with fear and rage, leapt at Rhea and knocked her to the floor. She pulled a blade out from somewhere and pressed it to the Archbishop's throat. She said something, but the Silence still affected her and it became a soundless snarl.

Sayori heard Dimitri and Claude rush into the room behind her, and the clamor of a rush of boots down the hall—Byleth and the Knights?—but she was busy, frantically struggling with the one tome she had on her that might help. In their planning, neither Byleth nor her had suspected she'd immediately leap to hostage taking, so they hadn't prepped much that could help. She pulled out the book as Rhea and Kronya kept struggling on the floor and it felt like everyone was screaming, and quickly cast an intentionally weak Lightning. It was only a brief flash of light, but it was enough—Kronya visibly recoiled,

and before she could get her bearings again an arrow sprouted from her back.

"—AUGH!" she screamed as she collapsed in pain, the Silence finally wearing off. "How dare you! You filthy—agh—pathetic fools! You have no right to—"

Rhea clambered to her feet, holding the dagger at the Agarthan's neck now. "I know exactly who, and what, you are," she thundered. "You have no right to be in this place!"

Kronya screamed wordlessly and tried to straggle to her feet as well, but Catherine and Alois appeared almost out of nowhere to restrain her instead. Everyone rushed in now: Byleth, Seteth, a crowd of Knights, and in the back Sayori spotted a very confused Hanneman.

"Solon!" Kronya screamed in desperation. In a flash of purple light he actually appeared, clad as Tomas—but Byleth had expected this. She flicked the tip of the Sword of the Creator at him just as he materialized and caught him in the neck, cutting off his counter spell with a jerk and gurgle of blood. His own disguise dissipated as he collapsed to the floor.

Rhea, disgust in her eyes, glanced between the two of them. "So the corruption grew deeper than we thought! Yes, I know full well who you are—wretched traitors of the goddess!"

"Do you have any idea of the retribution we will wreak against you?" Kronya coughed. "That we have already—"

"You will do no such thing!" Rhea snarled. "As of now your very lives are forfeit!"

"You...truly believe it is only the two of us?" Solon croaked from the floor, still somehow conscious. "Heh. Such foolishness. We are far more numerous and powerful than you could ever...grk...imagine. Our hands hold the strings of Fódlan from the shadows. We could kill

everyone in this room and make it look like an accident." He smirked. "Or a senseless tragedy."

"Enough!" Rhea pointed out the door. "This ends now. Not only your meaningless ramblings, but your schemes altogether! I will not let you, or anyone, threaten this land again!" She was almost incoherent with rage, and in that moment Sayori could clearly see Saint Seiros in all her terrifying glory.

The knights closest to the two Agarthans finally hefted them up and led them away, Kronya sobbing and Solon entirely silent but clutching at the wound in his neck. Rhea tore her eyes away from them to Byleth, standing tall with only the barest hint of triumph.

"You knew," Rhea said, and Byleth nodded. "How?"

"Who were those people?" Dimitri suddenly asked. He stepped forward, a strange glint in his eyes. "Who, Professor? Archbishop?"

"I admit, I'm curious myself," Claude chimed in.

"I can explain everything," Byleth said, glancing between everyone in the room now watching her. "They are Agarthans, ancient enemies of the goddess and her followers"—Rhea gasped—"and I will explain how I know this...in the Holy Tomb. Please, can we gather all of the students for this?"

Rhea, stunned, only nodded.

### 1.9 Aureate Sun, Part Five (by Tetradrachm)

The Holy Tomb was massive and dark, the full size of the chamber almost impossible to make out. Most of the light came from the torches of the murmuring crowd, creating shadows which shifted across the distant walls.

Sayori found herself standing between Claude and Hilda in the crowd, torn between worry and relief that the plan was firmly in

motion. Claude was unusually silent, while Hilda had only quieted down after grilling them both extensively on what was going on. Now, she was busy filling in Ignatz and Lysithea next to her, who were both visibly shocked.

Sayori herself was busy scanning the crowd for the people she needed to track most.

Edelgard hadn't panicked or fled the monastery when they'd heard the news about the Agarthans, but she was visibly tense, standing stiff a ways in front of her. Sayori had made an effort to get to know her over the past few months because she so achingly reminded her of Monika; she knew how to reach out to her, and potentially how to help her, but she just hadn't had enough time to break down her walls before everything blew up. It didn't help that Hubert made a habit of inserting himself into every conversation they had. However, she knew Edelgard respected Byleth very highly, and Byleth was banking on that respect to try and help her to see reason now.

Dimitri was another one she was worried about; the way he'd become so intense in Rhea's chambers made her wonder if he'd picked up on Solon's comment about senseless tragedies and connected it to Duscur. She had seen him give terse explanations to his Blue Lions on the way down as if they were readying for battle which, perhaps, they were.

Sayori was actually most worried about Rhea's reaction to what was about to happen. If she rejected Sothis' message, there would be a fight that could easily escalate into a full war. Out of everyone at the monastery Rhea was the least approachable for Sayori, mostly because of her constant duties as Archbishop. It meant that she couldn't be sure how she would react to so many revelations at once—especially those so close to her heart.

Byleth finally stepped forward from where she'd been talking to someone—Seteth, maybe—and strode up the stairs towards the throne. The crowd quieted almost immediately and she sat down in

silence, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. Rhea's hands rose to her chest as if she were praying.

When she opened her eyes and began to speak, Rhea's hands fell limply to her sides.

"First of all," Byleth began, "you all need to know that I know about far more than just those infiltrators. I know the truth about the origins and natures of Crests. I know the truth of the fate of the progenitor god. I know the truth of things that only you each know as well—" She pointed at Dimitri. "I know that you lost your sense of taste after the Tragedy of Duscur." As his brow furrowed, she pointed next at Mercedes. "I know that Jeritza is in truth your long-lost brother, Emile."

"What?" Mercedes gasped.

Pressing on, Byleth turned to Lysithea. "I know that you have a shortened lifespan because of your two Crests, forced on you by Imperial mages that were in truth agents of the same group as our infiltrators!" Lysithea paled and reeled back with a squeal, and the crowd roared.

"A shortened lifespan?" Hilda asked beside Sayori. "That's what she's always meant about needing to work hard for her parents!?"

Finally, with a commanding thrust of her arm Byleth singled out Edelgard. "That same group was the one that experimented on you and all of your siblings, destroying them all and granting you the Crest of Flames!"

"How?" Edelgard almost shouted over the arguments and shrieks of the crowd, obviously stricken. "How do you know this?"

"Silence!" Seteth somehow managed to call out over the crowd, bringing the volume down a good deal. "Professor, explain yourself at once!"

"Ever since just before I arrived at the monastery, I have had visions of a young girl speaking to me, telling me things I had no way of knowing. It was only recently that she told me the truth: that she is the remnant of the progenitor god Sothis, placed in me when I was born as her Crest Stone."

"What is this heresy?" Catherine demanded, stepping out of the crowd. "The goddess is not a child, or a shade! Archbishop—"

"Catherine, please," Rhea said quietly. There were tears running down her cheeks. "Let her finish."

Catherine was visibly taken aback. "A-as you wish, my lady."

"Many eons ago," Byleth spoke softly, voice carrying through the chamber regardless, "the progenitor god came to Fódlan, and shared her gifts with its people." She launched into the same story Byleth had told her months ago, which had in turn been told to her by Rhea in a previous Loop. She skimmed over some parts, such the Ten Elites being Nemesis' allies, but started into the truth about Sothis, the Agarthans, and the Nabateans. When she reached Nemesis' murder and dismemberment of Sothis, Rhea crumpled in on herself, placing her head in her hands, although Sayori thought she might have been the only one to notice, as everyone else was caught on more obvious issues.

"Wait," Sylvain of all people interrupted, "so you're saying the Sword of the Creator was literally made from the creator?" He held up his own Lance of Ruin. "Does that apply to all of the Relic Weapons?"

There was a fresh outbreak of murmurs and gasps after that, with Catherine especially recoiling in shock. "No," Byleth said, "the other Relic Weapons weren't created from her, but they were created from the other Nabateans, when Nemesis attacked them at the Red Canyon—"

"So I'm carrying around one of these people's spines, or something," Sylvain carried on, more bitter than Sayori had ever seen him.

"Wonderful. But the really important part, the part I think a few of us have caught onto already: Crests derive from the same thing?"

Byleth took another deep breath. "They do."

"And how does the goddess feel about that?" Sylvain challenged her.

Byleth's mouth twisted. "Have you already guessed everything I will say?"

"No, but I think I can see where she's going with this. Just to be clear, I do believe you on this—really—and the logical outcome of all this is that Sothis isn't too happy about her children's blood being used to decide who rules the land. Am I right?" Sayori's mind flashed back to Miklan, one of the few people Byleth hadn't been able to save with foreknowledge, and she understood exactly why he was suddenly so invested in this.

Byleth bowed her head slightly. "She does feel very strongly that the hierarchy built on Crests in Fódlan has been a grave misstep."

There was a moment of utter silence through the hall, until it was broken by a low chuckle. "Truly," Hubert spoke for the first time, "this is the most incredible thing I've heard in quite some time. The goddess herself is supposed to have been reborn in a random mercenary, only to tell us that our entire society has been led astray? If nothing else, this is...deeply entertaining. But there is only one person whose opinion matters here, I suppose."

"Yes," Catherine agreed, face set. "Archbishop Rhea, please, do away with this liar!"

Rhea shook her head fervently, almost frantic. "Please, no, no, I can't—do this—"

"Professor!" Dimitri called out as the crowd rose to argue with itself—Sayori could barely hear him over Hilda's shouts of protest and Claude's called questions of his own. "Please, Archbishop, just tell

me ask this—Professor, did the infiltrators cause the Tragedy of Duscur?"

Byleth slowly nodded.

It was then, finally, that all hell broke loose.

### 1.10 Aureate Sun, Part Six (by Tetradrachm)

**Content warning for brief discussion of PTSD and schizophrenia.**

The two fencers raised their swords and began with a few quick feints and darts, circling each other and raising little clouds of sawdust off the floor. The training grounds were well lit by the torches they'd set up before getting started, in spite of the pitch darkness outside. Finally, one of the fencers lunged in a more daring attack and the match started properly. For a few rapid maneuvers, they raced through attacks and counterattacks.

Sword crashed against sword in a pair of equally matched swings, but one was faster than the other in disengaging. The sharper of the two, a wickedly curved and almost segmented thing, swung out to the left before twisting back in toward the other, normal sword's wielder. It jerked oddly in its path to aim straight for his heart—and then stopped just before piercing his clothes.

"The Crest activated again," Sayori panted, slowly lowering the fearsome blade. "I could...feel it aiming towards your, uh, vitals. It especially responds to the sword, I guess? It usually doesn't activate when we're just training!"

"I think I know what you mean," Dimitri answered, wiping sweat off his forehead. "I can feel something similar when I wield Areadbhar now, a connection to my Crest that...thrums within me, when I hold it. And, well, I suppose we know why that connection exists now." He looked vaguely ill at the thought.

It had been about a month since Byleth had told all in the Holy Tomb, and life at the monastery since then had been...eventful, to say the least. Within days of Kronya and Solon's executions, the other Slitherers throughout Fódlan had presented a unified front and announced a "defensive alliance to fight the heretical Central Church" across all three nations. In practice, it meant that most of the continent fell into chaos, as supporters of the Central Church fought against the Slitherers' supporters and troops.

Garreg Mach had had a serious crisis unto itself for the first few days after the events of that night as well. The Blue Lions had very nearly marched off to war right there and then, if it hadn't been for Ashe pointing out that they didn't actually know where or how to fight the Slitherers. Rhea had eventually, reluctantly accepted that Byleth was telling the truth after a private meeting where Byleth had revealed more personal information she knew about the Nabateans, and had agreed to try and reform the Church once the Slitherers were destroyed. Edelgard and Hubert had retreated to her room for almost a full day before emerging and having an interesting meeting of their own with Byleth—apparently, the Flame Emperor had appeared in full regalia to agree to support their cause, on the condition that freedom of religion was allowed throughout the Empire after the war. Byleth had been the most exuberant Sayori had ever seen her that day; she'd finally succeeded in bringing the entire monastery together onto one side.

But that only meant that the war began in earnest for them sooner than what Byleth had described as Baseline, and with less advance notice. All three nations were engulfed in internecine warfare, some less so than others; what made matters worse was the fact that the Slitherers could potentially wipe an entire city off of the map with their Javelins of Light. Because of this, the monastery hadn't made any aggressive moves yet and had only had to fight off a few scattered Imperial forces so far. Instead, they were in the process of building their strength for a surprise assault on Shambhala as soon as possible to end the existential threat that the Javelins posed. Lord Rodrigue had somehow managed to smuggle Areadbhar out of

Cordelia's Fhirdiad and deliver it to Dimitri by a lone rider two weeks ago, for instance, while the entire Golden Deer house had accompanied Sayori herself to Edmund territory to slay the Wandering Beast just last week. Blutgang was hers, now, and she was still getting used to it.

Sayori shook herself out of her thoughts. "As long as we honor their memories, we have to use every advantage we can, right?" They were up against giant magical mechas and nukes, apparently; they needed all the help they could get.

"Yes, of course," Dimitri said with firmer resolve. "We must end this war as quickly as possible and exterminate those accursed monsters." His face twisted into something dark, and Sayori felt a wave of pity for him again.

They'd been meeting for private training sessions once or twice a week, ever since the fateful late night he'd stumbled on her shredding training dummies with lightsaber forms. She'd been frustrated with herself over issues both from Fódlan and from home and needed to take it out somehow. They'd had a fruitful conversation about anger and how to express it, and since then they'd used these sessions both to improve and to work on their feelings, so to speak.

She knew that he struggled with what was most likely schizophrenia, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder from the Tragedy of Duscur, and Byleth's revelations had brought those issues to the forefront for a while. He had told her about the visions he saw sometimes, the faces and voices of the dead crying out for vengeance, and she'd carefully talked through the emotions and stresses he felt about it all with him. Medical treatment was essentially impossible in Fódlan, but she'd done her best to give him a sort of therapy and he genuinely was doing better. It still made her feel for him each time he was engulfed by his rage, though, because she damn well knew what it was like to be overwhelmed by her own emotions.

"We should be heading out to attack them as soon as Claude returns from negotiating with Judith." And Nader, and Almyra by extension, but that wasn't something Byleth had told everyone yet. Claude's true heritage was one of those secrets that might have caused the unified front at Garreg Mach to break down, the same way Rhea being unveiled as Saint Seiros might have.

"Any day now, yes," Dimitri muttered. He clutched his fists and his sword quivered slightly in his grip. "You'll be glad too, won't you?"

"Me? What?" The question took her by surprise; it was a strange way to change the subject. "Will I be glad about what, going to fight?"

"To finally do something?" he answered her with another question. "I can see how you're...constantly fighting with yourself over your worries. The tensions you always hold...won't they be relieved when we can answer them on the battlefield?"

"Oh. You've...noticed, huh?" Even in spite of how busy she'd been trying to get to know everyone and help them during her time in the Loop so far for some reason her worries from home had never totally left her this time around. They hung in the corners of her mind like—not like rain clouds quite, not that again, but maybe a hint of fog. "Well, it'll help to go do something, definitely, but I'm mostly worried about everybody else, you know?"

The real long term problems never left her—how to help Monika and how to handle her childhood friend. For some reason, her time at the Monastery had brought both issues into sharper relief somehow. Maybe it was through the comparisons she could draw between it and home? Edelgard scared her sometimes in how similar she was to Monika, and all the boys had their moments where they reminded her of H...her friend.

"We will all survive," Dimitri said, thankfully completely missing her point. "We know what we'll be up against thanks to Byleth, and the

goddess. To think that we've been so blessed...with her on our side, we cannot lose!"

The real Sothis was something of a sarcastic little imp from how Byleth had described her and was hardly the type to go around bestowing blessings, not that Sayori could ever tell him that. "I know, I'm sure we'll make it through"—her and Byleth both were being very careful on that front—"but it's not like ending the war will solve everything, will it?"

Dimitri blinked at her. "Nothing will ever solve everything," he said slowly, "no. Too much has," he exhaled heavily, "already happened. All we can do is go forward, for those we have already lost and for those who still depend on us."

"That's it? Just out of a sense of responsibility?" she was obliged to ask him. Sometimes it almost felt that way for her back home, too—especially when it came to her friend.

Birch.

That actually was how she felt about him by now, and it wasn't his fault—it was just that he was so completely different from loop to loop that it felt like she had to keep up an emotionally exhausting friendship with a stranger every time. "Never mind," she said suddenly, "I know exactly what you mean."

It was like how being friends with Natsuki and Yuri had been before they Activated, but worse, because at least their personalities had stayed the same from loop to loop. When Hiroaka had still been Hiroaka, he'd been...consistent in his own way. Now, she Awoke every Loop with close memories and connections to someone completely different each time, an albatross of feelings nipping at her heels every time.

"I..." they both started at the same time, and Dimitri ducked his head. "Please, you go first!"

"Oh, okay..." She'd had the sudden urge to talk about what was really bothering her—and wasn't that the darnedest thing? She'd been trying to help him and she'd run smack dab into wanting him to help her. He wasn't even a Looper, not that there was anything wrong with that, but it wouldn't be fair to him, would it?

She kept on talking anyway. "I was just going to say...I have a friend, back home, who used to be my closest companion in the whole world." Thousands of different, conflicting Loop memories of their childhoods flashed through her head for a moment. "When we grew up, though, he...changed. A lot." Sometimes he was soft and gentle, a really sweet guy. Sometimes he was awkward and a bit self-centered. Sometimes he was very much self-centered, but still a good person at heart. And sometimes, too often, he was a straight-up jerk. "And he's, uh, an important vassal of the Edmund family now, so I still have to see him a lot, but I'm really not...close to him, anymore." She just couldn't hold onto that same affection she'd once had for him. She didn't know him anymore, not really—she didn't even know his name!—and thinking about him just made her sad more than anything else.

After a moment of being lost in her own, steadily darkening thoughts, Dimitri prompted her, "But he was once your friend? Then...you should carry on in the memory of the friendship you once had. Just because he's changed now doesn't mean that friendship never happened."

"Yeah, you're right, of course," she agreed, trying to keep an edge of frustration out of her voice because she'd already decided that a long, long time ago. "But that doesn't make dealing with him any easier—ugh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, my problems are just peanuts compared to your elephants—"

"I see how they weigh on you, though," he said gently. "And these are the kinds of problems that you cannot simply solve on the battlefield—so you need to speak about these things. And I am willing to listen."

"Thanks." She gave him a grateful smile. There had been loops where she'd told all to her friend this same way and he'd actually been willing to listen. Dimitri was a good person in the same way that her friend was at his best, even though he was burdened down with issues her friend never had. It was very generous of him. "Yeah, talking about it does help, really. Thanks for listening to me ramble about it!"

She wondered briefly if it wasn't very nice of her to bother a non-Looper with a Looper's issues. There'd been philosophical debates about this before across Yggdrasil; some people felt like it was selfishly taking up a sentient non-Looper's brief and precious time existing before they reset and that that was a bad thing, while others—like a few of her fellow Looping Sith—saw it the same way but of course thought the selfishness was just peachy. She didn't agree with that basic view, though, she decided. Dimitri was her friend now, after getting to know him, and being a good friend meant treating them equally to yourself. She'd let him shoulder some of her burdens, just as she'd shoulder some of his, even if he would forget it all when the Loop ended.

"Of course," Dimitri said, "goddess knows I've rambled at you enough!" They shared a laugh. "Hm...feel like another spar?"

"Oh, definitely! More than just one—we're still only getting started!"

She really did enjoy sparring now; she'd take Yuri up on that offer she'd given to learn swordsmanship a while back. Even though it was stressful at times she was really glad that she'd had this Loop, both to help Byleth and Sothis and for the friends she had made here. They were all really great people, and she'd definitely miss them when she got back home. Once they started Looping—and she got the feeling many of them would, with the way Byleth knew them all so well—she'd just make friends with them again!

They both raised their blades again, and he quirked her an encouraging smile. She looked him in the eyes and smiled right back. The fog dissipated, just a little bit.

## 1.11 Aureate Sun, Part Seven (by Tetradrachm)

Shambhala was a frenzy of fire and magic.

Massive magi-technological structures sparked with raw energy, leaping to and fro on the circuits that covered them. A massive trio of Titanus mechs (that was definitely what they were, and it felt so out of place in Fódlan to Sayori) lumbered forward, another round after the previous two they'd already defeated. In her peripheral vision she could see Lysithea, Annette, Hubert, and Constance engaged in furious magical battle with a group of Agarthan mages. From behind and around her on all sides arrows flew forward from their archers hidden in safer positions. Claude and Ingrid, on wyvern and pegasus mounts respectively, soared over the closest installation to attack a command tower.

"Onwards!" Dimitri shouted beside her, and the small group of forward fighters with them charged at the nearest Titanus. Raphael punched its arm with his massive gauntlets, while Hilda jumped into a powerful downward strike with Freikugel beside him. Catherine scored a solid blow directly to its chest with Thunderbrand, followed up by Edelgard with a seemingly less powerful side thrust with a steel axe that she spun into a ripping attack that tore the automaton clear open.

There was no way in Eiken that people hitting a giant metal shell could usually break through it with bone and plain old steel weapons. Anime physics were awesome. At least, she thought was anime; she'd never actually recognized which Branch it was, although bits and pieces seemed familiar.

Now it was her turn to attack the next closest Titanus, and she charged with Blutgang held tight at her side. The Crest Stone, and then the entire blade, glowed as she launched her first slash, then another, then a third onto its left arm. It didn't make a dent in the metal, but the magic of the sword clearly did something to the mech's magical circuits, causing them to flash erratically. It was slow to respond, and when its arm finally came up in a counterattack, she

dodged it easily with a side roll—the only hard part was keeping Blutgang from cutting her—and then hopping back to her feet out of range. In the mean time, Dimitri and Caspar made their melee attacks, strong blows onto its core that nevertheless didn't quite break it. It readied another blow and Dimitri grit his teeth, ran forward and intercepted it with Areadbhar. The strike nearly knocked the spear out of his hands and shoved him to the ground.

"You okay?" Sayori called out in worry. She readied a Physic, just in case.

"I am alright," he muttered, "but—"

The Titanus loomed over the two of them suddenly, advancing directly forward and ignoring Caspar. Sayori swung her blade up but it might have been too late, this was going to hurt—

A cluster of arrows appeared in its "head" and it froze. Sayori exhaled in relief and glanced over at Dimitri climbing to his own feet, mostly unscathed.

"I did it!" Bernadetta cheered from somewhere nearby.

Their reprieve was short-lived, though, because yet another group of Titanus rounded the corner. Everyone readied their weapons again, but it was all happening so quickly that Sayori was sure they'd get tired fast if waves of the giant mechs kept coming. It was a brutal slog, and a dangerous one; if they got tired too quickly they could easily be overwhelmed.

Then, slowly but surely the entire group of Titanus slowed to a stop, heads bowing and arms falling their sides. Sayori could have sworn she heard a computer powering down. Seconds later, a panel on one of the structures next to them hissed open and Yuri Leclerc emerged, looking smug.

"Well now, that wasn't so hard," he said with a slight, taunting smile. "Just a few fools that needed their necks sliced and a few wires

broken to get those metal hulks to quit."

A ragged cheer came up from the melee group, Sayori joining in. Sure, Yuri was a little bit bloodthirsty, but he was their little bit bloodthirsty guy—oddly enough, it reminded her of her own Yuri a little bit. Most of the Officers' Academy was just as bad anyway, including Dimitri. Most importantly, the big, scary mechs weren't a problem anymore.

Now they could advance, and they did, hurrying around the same corner the Titanus had come from to run into a group of unsuspecting Agarthan mages. They all raised their staffs just a bit too late and found themselves on the wrong end of various stabby implements, as Natsuki occasionally called them. The process repeated a few times as they raced towards the center of the complex, where Byleth had warned them that the Javelin control center was located. Finally as they approached a massive staircase most of the delegation from Garreg Mach assembled again, Byleth at the lead. She raced up the steps and examined the complex magical inscriptions above for a moment, then started carefully taking it apart.

"It's down!" she called out after a minute, and the whole chamber rang out with cheers. Apparently in Baseline Thales was here when they attacked, and usually triggered the Javelins to fire on the underground city itself in an attempt to take everyone down with him. Thankfully this time around he was still off being Lord Arundel somewhere in the empire and hadn't had notice to try and beat them here.

The desperate race against time was only half-finished, though, and in a certain sense the second part was more urgent. That's what the cavalry wing of the force was busy doing this whole time: racing down into the depths of Shambhala to track down the Slitherers' other remaining threats—most importantly their zombified Nemesis—and destroy them before they were set off. It had been a very clever, complex tactical arrangement devised by Byleth well in advance, and—

Sayori froze, her mind suddenly latching onto that one word. Tactical...

"Tactical genius...blue hair..." she muttered to herself as Jeralt emerged at the head of the cavalry contingent nearby, roaring in triumph. Byleth raced over to him and engulfed him in a hug even before he'd gotten off the horse, but Sayori barely even noticed.

Tidbits she'd heard from their Smash Branch friends flashed through her mind, and the more she compared them the more she knew it had to be true. "Medieval setting...secret dragons...the Crest of Flames! The Fire Emblem!" she shouted in triumph before immediately realizing what she'd said and turned bright red. Thankfully, very thankfully, everyone was shouting all sorts of things at the same time and no one paid her any mind.

Was it wrong that she was almost more happy that she'd finally figured out what sort of Branch it was than from the fact that they'd won?

It didn't matter, anyway; scarcely five minutes after the battle was over and they were all heading up to the surface Claude asked her if she'd "finally spill the beans on her big secret, whatever it was." That night, she got all of the students she'd gotten close to together and told them...well, not everything, but most of it.

There was still a war to be finished, but she knew now that everything would be alright.

—

**Aureate Sun: Epilogue (extra)**

—

Sayori: Smiling Dreamer

After the assault on Shambhala, the threat of those who slither in the dark was ended as a unified force, but the daunting task of pacifying Fódlan remained. Throughout the following campaigns to end the anarchy across the continent Sayori became known as a diplomatic genius, and one beloved by the people. She was a key figure in organizing the eventual, renewed treaties between the three nations of Fódlan, and according to some legends she wrote them entirely on her own.

An important part of her success was the close bonds she shared with leading figures in all three nations, especially their rulers. Once the wars had ended she became an ambassador between them, conveying private information and personal news with her closest companions in Fódlan.

Even long after the Loop ended a few short years later and she returned to the Literature Club she treasured her memories of all the friends she had made, especially her training partner Dimitri.

AN: Coming up in Chapter Two, Byleth and Sothis adjust to life in the Loops, and the first of Byleth's students Awaken as well...

By the way, if you would like to contribute to this project, or even just talk about it live, feel free to join us on in the Loops threads!

# Chapter 2

## 2.1 Swapped Out (by Tetradrachm)

Byleth Woke Up as he slowly woke up from what felt like an incredibly heavy sleep, barely able to pull his head off of the stone he'd rested on. As he slowly came to he realized that he recognized where he was: on the throne in the Holy Tomb. Sothis stood before him, dressed in his usual mercenary garb, and he glanced down to see that he was in a form of her usual garments.

At least he didn't have her usual hair.

"How strange..." Sothis muttered. "It would seem that...I am in your position this Loop." She shifted awkwardly. "It is uncomfortable being in a different form, but...familiar, from those memories we share."

"It is the same for me," Byleth said evenly. He could feel wisps and hints of the incredible power he wielded as the progenitor god, but could remember almost nothing of his in-Loop past. He was struck by a sudden curiosity to give his newfound powers a try, but this early in the Loop they probably wouldn't work all that well yet, as Sothis had discovered in past Loops.

"Well then," Sothis said challengingly, "let us see how well I can do as the hero of this story."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Byleth answered with a smile.

—

"Those...those brats!" Sothis raged, pacing around her room at Garreg Mach about a week later. "Why can they not understand the simple lessons I am trying to teach them!?"

"These things take time," Byleth said patiently, floating in the corner. "They always do, every Loop."

"Half of them hardly even pay attention in class, and the others all have pre-conceived notions of battle! Why, I saw Linhardt fall asleep during one of my meticulously planned lessons!"

"That's...just what he does."

"Well, he shouldn't!" Sothis paused and took a deep breath. "I suppose I am...envious of your patience about this. You never get so frustrated teaching them as I feel now!"

"Well, you know why I don't usually get too emotional—" Byleth cut himself off. "Wait, is my Crest Stone not influencing your emotions?"

"Huh," Sothis mused. "I suppose it isn't. I almost wish it were—these delinquents make me want to tear my hair out!"

## 2.2 A Rivalry Most Noble (by Zum1UDontNo)

"Correct me if I am wrong," Sothis said, "but this has not happened before, has it? I feel I would have remembered this."

"Don't make me laugh! I am Ferdinand von Aegir, next in line to be Prime Minister of the Adrestian Empire! You could not hope to compete against me!"

"On the contrary, you could not hold a candle to I, Lorenz Hellman Gloucester, heir to the County of Gloucester! I am twice the noble you are!"

Byleth looked around the dining hall, shaking his head. "No, this is definitely the first time. I've never seen them act this way before." In the dining hall, several students and even a few faculty members watched in disbelief, confusion and, in some cases, amusement. "Perhaps this is another Variant, like Sayori mentioned. They're acting a lot more... extravagant than normal."

Ferdinand and Lorenz glared at each other from atop a table, Lorenz looking down on Ferdinand smugly. Ferdinand ran a hand through

his hair without breaking eye contact, and Lorenz adjusted the rose on his shirt idly.

And beside the two nobles sat Constance von Nuvelle of the Ashen Wolves, shaking her head with a small smile on her lips.

"You, Lorenz Hellman Gloucester, are hardly worthy of Constance's affections!" Ferdinand shouted. "As the noblest of nobles, I am easily the better suitor of us two. Would you not agree, Constance?"

"Do not listen to this fool's prattering any longer," Lorenz declared, also turning to face Constance. "I'm sure you can see I'm the far superior choice in this regard. Between my looks, my elegant tastes and my status among the nobility, it should hardly be a difficult decision."

"Ahahaha!" Constance laughed, raising a hand to her mouth. "I'm sure this position would be quite enviable! Two nobles, fighting for my hand? But of course, it's to be expected for one such as I."

"Oh, indeed!" Ferdinand bowed gracefully. "Your very presence is an honor to me, as mine would be to you! That we would reunite here, after so long apart, could only be destiny!"

Lorenz scoffed. "Tell me, Constance, would you rather let your House be rebuilt through the fickle hand of 'destiny?' Or would you take your life into your own hands by accepting mine? Spare not your time on Ferdinand von Aegir; his blind obsession with von Hresvelg should tell you all you need to know of him."

"Hey, I have a reason for my drive to surpass Edelgard!" Ferdinand returned to glaring at Lorenz, raising a fist in the air. "I can hardly be a good confident to Edelgard when she becomes Emperor if I cannot properly guide her, and I must surpass her in order to effectively do so! And who are you to speak in such a way, when your similar obsession with Claude holds no reason at all!"

"I will stand for your insults no longer!" Lorenz pointed at Ferdinand. "A duel, von Aegir! In the training hall, your spear to mine! With this we'll determine who is worthy of Lady Nuvelle!"

Ferdinand's eyes narrowed. "I cannot back down from a challenge, Lorenz! We battle at sundown!"

"Forget sundown, we shall battle now. Come, the training hall is but a few minutes away!"

"How wonderful!" Constance laughed again, standing up. "It fills me with joy to see the peaks you would ascend all for my sake. I do wonder who will win!"

"I can assure you, Constance, it will be I! Ferdinand von Aegir!"

"Pure nonsense! Lady Nuvelle, at the end of the day, I, Lorenz Hellman Gloucester, will be standing by your side!"

As Byleth watched in bemusement, he felt a presence behind him. Three presences. He turned around automatically, resisting the instinct to draw his sword.

"Hey, Teach!" Claude said. "Any idea what's going on in here? What's Lorenz gotten himself into this time?"

"It's a good deal louder than normal in the dining hall," Dimitri added. "Claude, Edelgard and myself were discussing our respective houses when we heard the commotion."

Edelgard frowned. "My teacher, Ferdinand hasn't made a mess of himself, has he? I could recognize his boasting from across the Monastery."

Byleth shook his head. "I'm... not sure I could explain it to you." He watched as Ferdinand, Lorenz and Constance strode in their direction, making their way out of the dining hall. "Ferdinand and Lorenz were arguing over Constance, I believe."

"Lorenz and Constance, huh?" Claude put a hand to his chin. "I can see it. He's hit on practically every other girl in the academy."

"Be glad he's not as bad as Sylvain in that regard," Dimitri responded, before turning to the three figures that were approaching them. "Hello, Ferdinand, Lorenz, Constance."

"Hello, Dimitri," Ferdinand replied offhandedly. "Hello Edelgard."

"Would you mind moving, Claude?" Lorenz asked. "There's something for us to get to."

Edelgard and Claude blinked, before stepping to the side. The three walked past them, with Constance waving to Byleth as she left.

"That..." Edelgard tilted her head slightly. "That is the first time in some time Ferdinand had nothing to say to me."

"Yeah, and Lorenz was different too. Did you see how he just glanced at me for only a second? He's normally a lot more... scrutinous around me. Is he really that distracted by Constance?"

Byleth watched Ferdinand and Lorenz march to the training hall, with Constance in tow, and sighed. Whatever was about to happen couldn't possibly be good, he knew it.

"You are going to follow them, right?" Sothis asked. "To watch them?"

What a silly question. Of course he was.

**2.3 Learning Psychology (by tovath)**

[FE:3H] / [Vorkosigan Saga]

Byleth Awoke in a well appointed room facing a noblely dressed looked like this was a fused loop and she was female for it. Once her in loop memories came came in she blinked. Her father was a twice twenty veteran who had become an armsman for the Vorkosigan

clan after retiring from the regular army. This meant that Countess Vorkosigen was happy to pay for Byleth's education.

And you're suppose to be talking with her right now. reminded Sothis.

"Sorry, milady, I feeling a bit loopy at the thought of the opportunity you have offered me, Countess Vorkosigen."

"Don't worry, I'm glad you're fully Awake now," said Countess Vorkosigen, "and you can call me Cordelia. So what is your Loop like?" her voice was kind and Byleth's in loop memories told her she could trust this woman.

"I'm a teacher at a military academy, then a war happens and I end up fighting some of my former students." Said Byleth "Is there some way to learn to fix mental issues?"

She nodded, "Do you want that for yourself or for your students?"

"My students, I wish I could make it so they all are able to have long happy lives." That seemed more impossible every loop though.

"Well I can help you with that. It should be easy enough to get you on the road to a psychology degree. Now there are many ways to get a degree. The best would be to Beta but you might also find that to be the hardest as well."

I wonder what she means by that.

Byleth thought over what her in loop memories said about Beta it was the planet Countess Vorkosigen was from and It probably has something to do with the lady who got sex change operation.

Wait what?

If you say that is the best option then I will take it I am not afraid of hard work."

## 2.4 Too Late (by Tetradrachm)

"To the fires of eternity with you...El..."

A strike of Aymr and Byleth Awoke, only a few meters away from where Dimitri now lay sprawled on the ground at Edelgard's feet, on the Tailtean Fields. The sky was gray and the roar of the storm was matched by the chaos of the concluding battle, but it didn't match the wave of horror that swept over Byleth as he realized just how late of an Awakening he'd had.

"We must give him a proper burial," Edelgard announced, glancing back at the Black Eagle Strike Force as it assembled. "Villain though he was, once upon a time he was our classmate, and ruler of these lands." A few of them nodded soberly, and a pair of Imperial soldiers strode forward with a shroud.

Dimitri was no villain, Byleth knew that absolutely. A victim of forces beyond his control, yes, just the same as Edelgard, Claude, and even Rhea as well, and after so much had happened in this particular Loop he had been in a very bad place, but no villain. But there was nothing Byleth could do for him now; nothing but stand and mourn him silently.

He would see Dimitri alive and well, and able to be helped properly in but a short few years after the Loop ended, he knew that, but it was still a brutal shock to see one of his students, that he saw and knew every Loop, killed before him. It was awful.

Edelgard turned to him now expectantly, visually beseeching him for comfort he suddenly couldn't give. He bowed his head with acceptance of what she'd done but turned away before she could say anything.

It was too late for him to effect much of anything in this Loop, and that thought settled in his stomach as a new lump of dread. They'd need to pursue Rhea to Fhirdiad quickly and end things as soon as possible. After that...after that, he wasn't sure if he could bear

staying in Fódlan for the rest of the Loop. He'd ruled beside Edelgard as ruler of a united Fódlan after her victory before, but always when he'd Woken Up sooner and managed to ameliorate things as best he could. But no, Dimitri had died sometimes in those other Loops in spite of his best efforts as well and it hadn't hit him so hard; why did it affect him so much now?

Maybe it was the sheer horror of Waking Up to a killing.

Yes, he decided, this time he couldn't quite bear it. If the Loop stretched to last beyond the end of the war this time, he'd leave Fódlan as soon as it ended. Seeing what different form Almyra took this Loop might detract from the pain of it all, at least a little bit.

**2.5 Void Scenario 1 (by Awesomedude17)**

Byleth Awoke just as she was sent into a dark void by Solon. This always annoyed her, no ifs, ands or buts.

Soon enough, she noticed some peculiarities, in the form of a skeleton wearing a helmet and an absurdly humongous duck, large enough to ride on. The skeleton noticed Byleth and raised his(?) hand.

"Hello there. Did you run through the door too?"

"I was sent here by a portal."

"...Alright then."

The duck quacked.

" *Yggdrasil Shenanigans?* " Sothis said.

"More or less, Sothis."

" *Good. I got the feeling this is only the first of the weirdness we'll get. Time to fuse.* "

"I'll be seeing you the next Loop Sothis."

**2.6 A Moonlit Walk (by Awesomedude17)**

[FE:3H] / [Hellsing]

Byleth had Awoken near the very beginning of the Loop, just after she received the news that she'd been going to Garreg Mach to become a professor. Apparently, she felt the need to go out for a walk in the middle of the night.

Of course, such a move was dangerous, and she knew this. She reached for her blade and looked over her shoulder.

A sole man, dressed in red, was watching her closely. The shine around his eyes implied some form of glasses.

The two stood still silently.

"...Well?"

"Who are you?" Byleth demanded.

He scoffed as he walked slowly towards the Ashen Demon. "Lacking manners, aren't you?"

Byleth prepared to strike if need be.

"I suppose I cannot blame you. Please, let me join you on this walk." The man said as he stopped right by her.

Byleth looked him in the face, and saw a terrifying face. His smile showed off his jagged, inhuman teeth, and seemed quite bloodthirsty. She figured she'd tread lightly with him.

"Sure,"

"Lovely. My name is Alucard. I'm merely passing through. I do not intend to stay for long."

"Not the Branch you'd take?"

"Not really. My ship lost its Anchor."

"Quite unfortunate. Byleth, Anchor to Fodlan."

"Charmed. I suppose you've got some things to tell me before I let myself loose upon this land."

"No innocents."

"Awww... you're no fun."

Byleth narrowed her eyes at the man.

"At least point me towards some people no one will miss."

Byleth didn't need much to think on.

"There are quite a few. A civilization actually."

"A civilization? Color me intrigued if you want to commit genocide. Tell me everything." Alucard said as his eyes became visible, glowing red.

"Those who slither in the dark. They intend to disrupt the balance of these lands. They've already infiltrated the Church of Seiros."

"I've got no sympathy for religion."

"I don't have much reason to personally involve myself in it either, but these two are pretending to be who they're not."

Alucard hummed in thought.

"Those who slither in the dark. I suppose pretending to be who they're not is their specialty. What have they done to warrant this hostility from you?"

"One of them will kill my father-"

Alucard scoffed at this.

"-and they'll hurt the ones I care about as well. They'll bring about war to Fodlan."

"I relish war, Byleth, just so you know."

"Indeed, but war by cowards?"

Alucard stopped in his tracks.

"Cowards?"

"They killed my father by appearing behind him and striking him off the battlefield."

Alucard growled in clear frustration, "Oh my... that's far more convincing. Why would they try to bring about war?"

"Because they loathe the Church of Seiros."

"And what quarrel would they have with the Church?"

"They were defeated by the patron goddess of the Church, Sothis. They killed her after they were defeated by her and the kingdom."

"Sore losers too? Well, I need the names of these two, as well as the location of this civilization."

"Solon, pretending to be Tomas. The other doesn't join for quite a while, so they may be where they reside. As for where those who slither in the dark reside..."

Alucard watched as she pulled out a map and pointed at the location of Shambala.

"Here. Do as you wish."

"Oh, I will." Alucard chuckled, before it turned into a laugh, a laugh that became more maniacal as he arced backward, and his hair went wild.

Byleth shuddered to think what he would do now.

"I appreciate this information, Byleth. Allow me to reward you with a gift." Alucard took out a silver handgun, and held it out to Byleth.

"Thank you." Byleth said as she took it and Pocketed it.

"Now then, I suppose I'll be going to church now." Alucard said as he sank into the ground.

*What have I done* ?"

Whatever Byleth and her father were expecting, it wasn't seeing everyone at Garreg Mach looking on in horror as Solon was mutilated and strewn all over the market in front of the monastery, his head on a pike, eyes gouged out. Byleth caught the sight of Bernadetta, having apparently fainted at the gruesome sight. Dimitri seemed to be staring as if he was having a flashback. Dedue was patting him on the back, trying to comfort him. Edelgard looked on in silent horror. Hubert looked at the viscera with intrigue as he noted the quite unusual circumstances of the fact that he was so mutilated that there'd definitely not be an open casket funeral for him. Claude paced back and forth, muttering to himself. Hilda was nowhere to be seen, apparently due to simply witnessing the aftermath.

And then there was Rhea, looking from the top of the steps with a distraught look on her face, and Seteth, holding Flayn close to him tightly as they left.

Byleth was regretting letting Alucard loose now.

Thales prepared to launch the Javelins of Light. Reports of a wolf tamer slaughtering his men while ruthlessly slashing through his troops with his bare hands while said wolves mauled the ones who

were closer to his location... it was madness he couldn't keep track of, and he got desperate. He was so close.

"Well hello, hello, hello... You must be the leader of this group of... darkness dwellers."

"Y-you! You were sent here by Rhea, weren't you?"

"I'm afraid not. In fact, I'd say that had you been more upright, you'd have me as an ally. Sadly though-" Alucard flashed a terrifying grin, covered in blood, "-you have long proven yourselves to be the kind of people I loathe. Quite a few already killed themselves, and that makes me... cranky."

Thales steeled his resolve and glared at the vampire. "You are but one man."

"Perhaps, but these people?" Alucard stepped aside as the ghouls that used to be the various soldiers that fought him. "They're much more than one man. Dinner time, boys."

Thales only had but a moment to widen his eyes in horror as the hoard rushed him and devoured him alive, all while Alucard broke out in maniacal laughter over his screams of fear and pain.

He'd have to talk with Byleth later. This was so much fun.

### 2.7 Namecalling (by Zum1UDontNo)

"You were quite sloppy," Sothis informed Byleth. "Sloppy for your standards, anyway. You could have completed this a lot sooner were you not scurrying from one end of the chamber to the other."

"There were more reinforcements than normal," Byleth responded mentally, sheathing her sword. "I had to ensure my students' safety above all else."

"I'm sure they could have survived on their own," Sothis drawled, leaning on her Co-Anchor's most recent opponent's horse. "You

need to place more faith in them."

Byleth frowned. "If I hadn't intercepted that archer, Ferdinand would have been severely wounded."

"Which Linhardt or Dorothea could have easily healed. There was no need to insert yourself into their battles, especially if you were going to insist on facing this guy yourself."

"If any of the others overheard us, your plan would have disastrous consequences. We know from experience that if people learn the Flame Emperor's identity too early, everything could spiral into war faster than we can intercept."

"Mmm, I suppose you have a point. And it's not like you need their help to defeat this guy anymore." Sothis looked down at the other person sitting on the horse. "Speaking of, I think he's about to say something."

"Distracted," the Death Knight rasped. "You struck me down with ease, yet you've made no move to end my life. Instead, you stand before me, distracted."

"You're no longer a threat to me or my class," Byleth said. "I have no reason to be wary of you when you've been defeated."

"Distracted and arrogant. A dangerous combination." The Death Knight pointed his scythe forward. "It will be your death." A bright blue light flashed around his scythe, crackling loudly. He raised his arm to cast it forward, when a figure teleported into the room.

"Halt," the figure spoke. "You're having a bit too much fun." It was dressed in a black cloak, with a red-and-white mask and red feathers adorning the shoulder guards. The Flame Emperor.

And, Byleth knew, the leader of the Black Eagles herself.

"You are getting in the way of my game," the Death Knight growled, lowering his scythe. The glow of Thunder faded away.

"Hi, Edelgard," Byleth said nonchalantly.

"Hello, my teacher," the Flame Emperor responded absently. "You'll have more opportunities to play soon, Death Knight. Your work here is..."

Byleth allowed a small smile to creep onto her face as the Flame Emperor's words slowly trailed off. She'd been wondering what would happen if she did that for a few Loops- or rather, Sothis had, and Byleth's curiosity had been piqued alongside her's. The smile grew as the Flame Emperor glanced rapidly at her, before looking back to the Death Knight, and again back to her.

The Death Knight, for his part, evidently didn't feel like sticking around to watch. "Understood. I will go..." With a flash of purple light, the Death Knight disappeared from the underground chamber.

With nobody else nearby to focus on, the Flame Emperor was forced to look at the only other person in the room. "What's wrong, Edelgard?" Byleth asked. "You look worried about something."

"...You appear to... be mistaken," the Flame Emperor muttered. "I am not Edelgard."

Byleth's smile widened. "You know you can tell me about anything, Edelgard. I'm your professor, you can trust me."

"I am not Edelgard," the Flame Emperor repeated. "I am the Flame Emperor, a-and it is I who will reforge the world." It was very subtle, but the stutter was there.

"Ah, the Flame Emperor." Byleth nodded sagely. "Forgive me, I must have mistaken you for someone else."

The Flame Emperor's shoulders relaxed almost imperceptibly. "Good. See to it that you do not mistake me again."

"Of course." Byleth tapped a finger to her chin. "You know, Flame Emperor, you actually remind me of someone."

"Who?" From the way the Flame Emperor flinched, it was obvious they regretted asking the moment it came out of their mouth.

Byleth's grin grew. "A good friend of mine named Edelgard. You two are extraordinarily similar. Do you know her?"

Byleth internally giggled- actually giggled- as the Flame Emperor stammered and fidgeted for a few seconds. They shook their head and, with a brief "we will meet again," hastily teleported out of the chamber in a purple flash.

A moment later, Sothis joined in her giggles. "You must admit, that was quite entertaining."

"Did you see how she stiffened?" Byleth took a deep breath, not that it helped wipe the smile from her face. "This was one of your better plans."

The Progenitor God pouted. "I acknowledge that it was one of my better plans, but I do hope you aren't implying anything about the quality of my other ideas."

"Of course not." Byleth nodded towards the door. "It's time we got back to our class. Caspar will undoubtedly be disappointed that he couldn't fight the Death Knight..."

"He'd have gotten killed," Sothis scoffed. Byleth couldn't quite disagree. "Oh, but this isn't over, is it?"

Byleth shook her head. "Oh, no. I still have to call Edelgard by the Flame Emperor's name. And then there's Hubert, he'll be funny too."

"Good, good." Sothis yawned. "Oh my, I haven't been this tired for a few Loops. Must have been all the laughing... Wait until I'm... awake to continue... the plan..."

## 2.8 Sunrise (by Tetradrachm)

The midday sun was bright and hot all across the devastated field, but Claude didn't care. Heck, it reminded him a bit of home.

The Fell King Nemesis lay dead before him and Byleth, most of his army disintegrating behind him into dust. More of this crazy Agarthan magic—hopefully the last of it. The few not-dusting stragglers were being chased down by the Knights of Seiros, and the Golden Deer House was converging from where they stood, him and Byleth included, with cheers and shouts.

"You'll be happy there, in Almyra?" Byleth asked curiously as they walked—really, more like stumbled from exhaustion.

"It's where I have to be, for our new dawn," he explained. "It's...we can't just change things in one place, or else it won't take hold everywhere. And I've got a very good spot there to try and make that change happen."

Byleth opened his mouth to answer, but then blinked and a strange expression crossed his face. "Wow, talk about a late Awakening," he muttered under his breath.

"A late what?" Claude asked.

He blinked and suddenly, instantaneously, impossibly, it was night. It was night, and he was running alongside two people in red and blue. His mind tripped over itself and screamed that Dimitri and Edelgard were very much dead, but his body told him that he needed to not think about that and just keep on running. His battlefield instincts, hewn over the last few years, agreed, and so he didn't think beyond trying to run for cover from the—bandits?

"There!" the specter of Dimitri—a younger Dimitri, with two eyes and everything—shouted. He pointed at a group of men in armor standing guard in front of a cluster of houses.

Something about this felt strangely familiar to Claude; he couldn't really put his finger on it in the heat of the moment, but he felt like that was what they were supposed to do, somehow. They approached the guards, who eyed them warily but definitely took in their clothing as well. Oh, look at that, he was wearing his old school clothes again—wait...

"Whaddaya want?" the guard asked suspiciously.

"Please," Dimitri started, "bandits are chasing us and they'll be here soon, they'll attack the town—"

"You kids wealthy?" the man interrupted him. "We're mercenaries, see—what exactly would we be getting into, here?" Claude suddenly remembered this exact conversation, or rather, a conversation quite similar to this. It hadn't been exactly the same, but...

"We're students of the Officers' Academy at Garreg Mach," Dimitri explained, and the puzzle pieces finally came together in Claude's mind. He didn't much like the picture they made.

Time travel was...well, he knew it wasn't impossible, but the way Byleth had once described the Divine Pulse to him was nothing like this. If he could have gone back this far, Claude had no doubt Byleth would have used it to save everyone. But if it wasn't Byleth, then the only other, very logical now that he thought about it explanation was...

"Those who slither," he muttered to himself as the mercenary haggled with Edelgard and Dimitri. They must have had a backup plan even against their backup plan of Nemesis, to wind back the clock somehow to give them another go. It must have been that Thales or Solon or whoever got the same future knowledge that he had now.

Would this fight ever end?

No. No, he wouldn't let himself succumb to despair, not when they had just gotten so close! He could still do this—do it better than he had last time. He could get the Alliance into shape more quickly, warn the world about the dangers those who slither posed, and maybe even save some of his classmates' lives.

But first, these damn bandits.

Captain Jeralt strode up suddenly, as absolutely gigantic as Claude remembered him, and behind him Byleth, who eyed them all with his old, detached indifference. It stung after just how emotive and expressive he'd become in the future—no, he wasn't going to sink into despair here.

Was it really indifference, though? Claude watched Byleth carefully as the conversation went on. There was something in Byleth's stance—relaxed yet confident, a kind of assertiveness Claude was sure his friend hadn't had when he'd first come to Garreg Mach. Was it possible Byleth remembered as well? Or was he getting his hopes up over nothing?

Well, there was one way he could try and test his theory.

The bandits approached the town through the forest now, and Byleth stepped up just like he had last time to organize their plan of attack. Unlike last time, though, he very clearly knew what he was doing. It was almost as if he had advance warning of how they'd attack, and from where.

Hmm.

Just to be sure, though, Claude decided to show off a bit in the battle and see what reactions he got. He could see shapes in the shadows, so he lifted his bow before the others had even gotten into position and fired off a shot. To his shock, the shot went wide—his body was a bit shorter than he'd been before, and his muscles were less

strong, and he hadn't been ready for it. Still, he tried again and scored with his second shot, and even that was more than he'd been able to do the first time around.

The battle started in earnest, the familiarity of Byleth calling out instructions like always almost making up for the jarring feeling of fighting alongside dead people. Well, they'd just defeated a bunch of people who'd come back to life, so maybe it shouldn't have been so jarring.

"Claude, to your left!" Byleth shouted even as he cut down a thug of a man with a single blow. Teach definitely hadn't been able to do that so easy the first time around.

"On it!" Claude called back, and notched two arrows at once for the pair of bandits nearest him. His Hunter's Volley thankfully went off without a hitch, and as he turned back to Byleth in triumph he could see the shock clear on his friend's face. He met it with a challenging grin of his own.

Minutes after the battle, Byleth called him over in private on the pretense that they'd met when they were younger somewhere. As soon as they got somewhere private, Byleth looked him up and down, as intent as he'd ever seen him.

"Claude," Byleth asked carefully, "do you remember the future?"

"Yes!" Claude exclaimed, and Byleth let out a shuddering sigh. "I don't know how or why either, but I'm guessing it had something to do with the Agarthans, and—"

Byleth cut him off by grasping his hands almost desperately. "I am so glad you're finally Awake," he said with a strange sincerity.

Claude blinked at him. "Uh...I think I'm missing something. You know what's going on?"

Byleth smiled brightly. "Everything's okay, Claude. Don't worry, it's nothing to do with the Agarthans, or any of us—it's a lot bigger than that."

"Bigger than our big plans?" Claude teased him, and a fleeting tangent from that abruptly made him freeze. "Uh, Teach...does it have anything to do with why my memories of Almyra are completely scrambled up?"

The smile dropped from Byleth's face.

**2.9 Logic (by Awesomedude17)**

Claude nocked the arrow and pulled back the bowstring. He eased his fingers and let the arrow fly out.

Bullseye.

He reached into his quiver and pulled out another arrow.

"Practicing your archery?" Byleth inquired.

"Yes, teach. Considering what you told me of others from outside these lands, I had been thinking of many things. Worrying things. I realized that I couldn't just keep thinking about the worst, so I began to think about other possibilities."

"Such as?"

"Improving my marksmanship, of course."

"You're already one of the best archers I know, Claude."

" *You know* ," Claude repeated with emphasis, "But here's the thing. I would not be surprised if there are archers whose skills far surpass mine, and let's be honest. They'd best me on the days their skills are lacking. To them, I'm nothing special, and that just won't do for me."

"How can you be so sure about this assertion?"

"Because Sayori said some things that seem quite fantastical to you, didn't she?" Claude nocked another arrow.

Byleth opened his mouth to retort, only close it once he realized that Claude had a point.

"Point taken."

"Got that right, Teach. Always think that you're number two and someone else is number one."

"Aren't you quite cheeky."

Claude relaxed his fingers, and the arrow flew, splitting the arrow already embedded in half.

"Maybe..." Claude shrugged, thinking how that trick would be the easiest parlor trick to these other archers.

**2.10 Fine Dining (by Tetradrachm)**

There was something poking at her legs, and it was bugging Byleth something fierce.

She sat up, still waking up in both senses, and shoved at whatever it was poking her. It looked like a giant green fuzzball for a moment until her eyes focused.

"Honestly," Sothis complained, sitting down on the end of the bed, "must I always wake you, no matter which world we're in?"

"I guess..." Byleth muttered. She frowned. "I can't feel our usual connection. In fact..." She tried to Ping, and glanced around the very oddly decorated room. "I can't feel anything at all. Is this a Null Loop?"

"I believe it is. It is still strange, being entirely separate from you," Sothis admitted. "I don't know why that is, or why I am fully corporeal, but many things about this Loop are strange in my

memory. At least it is whole this time, so far as I can tell. My only issue is—" She yawned hugely. "—occasional bouts of narcolepsy."

"Hmm." Byleth's Loop memories trickled in: she and Sothis were sisters living with their father Jeralt, who was a retired military officer. They were a happily settled down family with both daughters attending school—non-military, perfectly ordinary (for this Loop) school. It was very, very unusual in that everything seemed to be so perfectly usual for them; that never happened!

"I think this is a post-nuclear Loop, on Earth," Byleth said. "Remember? That's what the Guide called them?"

"Right." Sothis scrunched up her face in concentration. "People have been to outer space, but they don't live there yet. Not like in the Vorkosigan Branch—or me, all those millennia ago."

When Sothis' strength as a Looper had grown enough to restore herself in Baseline, she was often able to recover her full memories as well. She could often recall incredible feats of power and creation, traveling across the universe and establishing new civilizations where she went [1]. She could use those powers now if she wanted, but it was only a very new thing. Last Loop they'd flown out into Fódlan's orbit together for the first time and looked at the stars. In sheer contrast, in this Loop neither of them were even athletes.

"I suppose this is a Hublike, then?" Sothis continued. "There are no sentient species besides humans so far as we know, and no magic—indeed, I dyed my hair this color!"

"I think you're right." Byleth considered this for a moment. "Do you think that means our Hub Backup might be out there somewhere?"

"Our...video game?" Sothis wrinkled her nose in distaste. "I still can't believe our journey together was condensed down into a form of mass entertainment."

"That's not their fault." Byleth hopped out of bed, heading for her closet to change out of her pajamas. "And besides, I'd like to meet the Loopers from the other Fire Emblem Branches. Don't you want to meet the other dragons?"

Sothis snorted. "Not particularly. They all sound so...dreadfully dull...mm..."

Byleth emerged a minute later to find Sothis fast asleep. She bit back a laugh but couldn't hold back a smile, and covered her carefully with a blanket before continuing with getting ready for the day. Apparently it was a weekend, which was nice, because otherwise she'd need to be getting ready for university.

Her classmates flashed through her mind...her very, very familiar classmates. She grabbed her phone off the dresser and scrolled through her contacts. "Claudester" was near the top, and she sent off a quick message asking if he was feeling Loopy. It was a very convenient thing, a phone—she'd have try and get cell service installed at the Monastery when she could.

While she waited for his answer, she Googled "Fire Emblem" and found exactly what she was hoping for. The video games existed here and she could probably buy a copy of her own title in a half hour or so at a store nearby. Unawake her had worked as a student teacher, so she had the money for it already.

In the midst of her planning something smacked against her window with a thud, which was odd because she had a second floor bedroom. She wandered over to the window to see Claude waving up at her on their lawn, a cluster of rocks in his hand.

—

"So I don't know if you know this, but everyone thinks I'm hilarious," Claude said almost conspiratorially.

"Do they? I can't believe it," Byleth teased him.

They were all in Claude's car now, headed for the closest department store. Byleth took shotgun and Sothis sat, blearily reluctant, in the back. According to her memories the town they lived in wasn't particularly large or wealthy by Earth standards but it was still amazing compared to anywhere in Fódlan; she was fascinated by everything she saw out the windows.

"I mean, everyone back home did, of course, totally, but here in the Hub too they love me. I was looking myself up, and there are all these memes—you know, internet humor—"

"I have the same Loop memories you do, Claude. I know what a meme is."

"Couldn't be sure. After all, you're my out-of-touch Teach, right?"

Byleth just rolled her eyes.

"But yeah, really, they've poked fun at anything and everything with me, and about me some too," Claude continued. "It's...a little uncomfortable, I admit, but they didn't know what they were doing, right?"

"Yes, it isn't their fault," Byleth agreed. "Well, what do they say about me?"

"Oh, lots of things. They like that you're the super cool Ashen Demon and the Fell Star, but they also think you shouldn't have been made a teacher 'cause you were so inexperienced starting out."

"I didn't know Seteth lived on the Hub," Byleth said dryly.

"Heh, good one, Teach. Oh, and also lots of people hate you because you got put in Smash."

"That doesn't even have anything to do with me!"

"People never need to have a logical reason to hate someone," Claude pointed out. Byleth couldn't argue that point. "And Sothis?"

he continued. "They think of her as this little gremlin that squats in your head and eats Doritos all day."

"How dare they! I—! Hm," Sothis cut off her protest suddenly. "Doritos are quite good..."

"How would you eat them when you're in my head, though?" Byleth asked her.

"I shall think on it."

Byleth thought she saw the mall they were supposed to be going to pass by them out her window. "Uh, Claude? Weren't we supposed to be going there?"

"Oh yeah, definitely. In a sec. There's somewhere I wanna swing by first quick, though, if that's okay?"

"I...guess? Where?"

"See, there was this one meme about my voice actor in the backup that got me curious. As it turned out, I haven't even been here in my Loop memories. So I figured, we're definitely hungry since we're talking about food, so why not pick something up here, you know?" A familiar red and gold building appeared around the corner, and Claude turned towards its drive thru. "Gotta see what this whole McDonald's thing is all about."

—

"This is delicious!" Claude exclaimed around bites of his Sausage McBiscuit. "It's awful for me, definitely, but it tastes really good."

"It tastes good in a way that makes me not want to eat it again," Byleth said. Sothis said nothing, tearing into her own McBiscuit with savagery.

"We don't fry things like this back home. Well, once or twice in Almyra, but it's not a normal thing." Claude licked his lips. "I'm

coming back here, that's for sure!"

"It's low quality, overpriced food."

"That's the whole appeal!"

"As your teacher, I'm advising you not to eat here."

"No no, you don't get to pull the Teach card on me. We're both students together here."

"Didn't you just call me an 'out-of-touch Teach'?"

"Yeah, but that was five minutes ago. This is now. You watch, I'm not just gonna keep coming here, I'm gonna make it a Golden Deer Looper tradition!"

"You do that, Claude."

**2.11 Rule of Three (Shots) (by Awesomedude17)**

[FE:3H] / [Call of Duty Zombies: Aether]

Byleth dreaded this day every time he reached it.

He steeled his resolve and decided to go through with it.

" *Still anxious, aren't you? It's not easy losing your parent. Just look at my daughter* ." Sothis spoke up.

Byleth said nothing.

" *Yeah. You're still gonna try, aren't you ?*"

Byleth closed his eyes and nodded.

" *Well aren't you stubborn. I suppose I can't blame you* ."

Byleth came up to his father, and went through the motions, prepared to try and defy fate again.

And so Kronya tried a cheap strike and Thales appeared as well to stop him.

"Seems like fate was..."

Suddenly, Kronya's head exploded, which was followed by a loud...

*BANG*

That clinched it. There was a visiting Looper.

"Ugh! Why must we do this, Takeo? We could be out there fighting slitherars... slipperoar... slithryn... bah, fuck it! Evil dark dwellers, and drinking vodka!" Nikolai Belinski of Ultimis complained.

"We are fighting them, Nikky." Takeo Masaki responded curtly. "We are just... taking it more carefully than usual."

Takeo pulled the trigger of his Arisaka to kill off the would-be assassin of Jeralt.

"Eh... At least I don't have to do actual sniping. Vision so blurry, I think I see triple. No wait, still double." Nikolai let out a loud belch as Takeo fired again at Thales, hitting center mass.

"We killed them both. Let's hope Claude didn't skimp on details." Takeo got up and handed Nikolai the rifle.

"Yeah yeah. Anyone can cycle bolt-." Nikolai drunkenly cycled the rifle, "-and fire at enemy." Nikolai dropped the gun, and it went off. After the two ducked for a moment, Takeo took out a pair of binoculars and looked around the area.

"Oh shit! You shot a priest, you drunken buffoon!"

"Is your fault! You gave Nikolai loaded gun! You knew this would happen!"

"Shut up and run with the evidence! Now!"

The two grabbed everything and fled the scene.

Byleth didn't take long to check over his father, and tell him to seek safety before looking for further signs of the mysterious sniper.

A loud bang, and a tell tale flash of light revealed their position. Byleth ran towards the location before coming across a mysterious pair of people in unfamiliar clothing. Both were clearly panicking as they ran by. Byleth followed distantly, managing to catch Solon's corpse watched over by Seteth and Rhea, both looking concerned over the disguised body. He paid them no mind as he followed the two to a hideout, one that Claude would use frequently in the Loops. Claude thought he wouldn't find out, but he had all the time in the world to find it over and over again, literally.

The two strange men looked around, one apparently drunk enough to remind Byleth of his father on a particularly bad night, before they entered as casually as two panicking men could attempt.

Claude had some explaining to do.

"-and that's basically what my fans in the Hub think of me." Claude said with a shrug.

"Pff. They associate you with a freaking burger chain?" 'Tank' Dempsey said with a chuckle.

"Yep, among other things. You should do the same when you end up in the Hub. Just be mindful of... well there's a reason why brothels exist, and the internet makes it incredibly easy to share that kind of stuff."

"Ew..."

"I'm very intrigued." Doctor Edward Richtofen remarked.

"Even if it includes pictures of us fucking?"

There was a very noticeable silence before Richtofen broke it with a flat toned sentence.

"My intrigue has waned."

"Yeah. Good answer. Ugh!"

The two man crew soon entered the hideout.

"About damn time you two came back. Did you kill 'em?" Dempsey asked.

"Eh, yes! Takeo sniped evil duo that try to kill father of teacher! Nikolai helped!" Nikolai spoke up.

"No you didn't." Doctor Edward Richtofen replied matter of factly.

"Eh... Nikolai helped by not doing anything, like accidently snipe priest."

Claude's expression went stone cold. "Who did you accidently kill?"

"Eh... Did not see clearly. Vision blurrier than memories."

"Who did you kill?"

"I can answer that." Byleth said, walking in with arms crossed.

"Teach?!"

"You led him here?" Takeo shouted at Nikolai.

"Me? You led him here!"

"I should've told Dempsey to go instead of Nikolai. I hate Dempsey so much and yet I decided that I wanted to be away from Nikolai's stench today." Richtofen said to himself.

"Enough. Who sniped Kronya, Thales and Solon, in that order?" Byleth said sternly. Richtofen quickly became amused at the relief on Claude's face, before realizing that he forgot a detail, and rolled his eyes in response.

"Was Takeo! He is madman with sniper." Nikolai replied instantly.

"Of course you'd jump on this." Takeo growled in frustration.

"Takeo... thank you for saving my father." Byleth said with a bow,

" ***What!*** "

"Oh! I am honored." Takeo said as he gave Nikolai a smug look.

"Claude explained to you what usually happens here, correct?" Byleth asked.

"Yep. Those who slither in the dark. Fucking edgelords." Dempsey said with a scoff. "Wait... who the hell's Solon, and why does his name sound like a place Richtofen would go to to do his nails?"

"I do need a mani-pedi actually. Thank you for reminding me, Dempsey."

"I was going to take care of him myself later," Claude admitted. "And I was going to get the teach's help."

"While I appreciate the thought, Claude, I'd recommend you tell me your big plans to me before going through with them, just in case."

Nikolai let out a loud belch before speaking, "Mmm... So uhhh... slippery men. Shall we just kill them? Is not like they are going to stop being jerkfaces about... uhh... whatever they are jerkfaces for. Da?"

"Given that you killed Thales, we don't have to worry about the Javelins of Light. Still, I suppose you're right. They're too dangerous to let live."

"Wait, Javelins of Light?" Takeo asked.

"Strange weapons that can destroy entire fields of land, and reduce them to wastelands." Byleth started off.

"Ooooh, they're nukes. Gotcha. Well shit, now we gotta destroy them guys." Dempsey said with a bloodthirsty excitement.

"There is no way this land will end up like Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This, I swear!" Takeo affirmed.

"If anyone is going to have weapons of mass destruction, it shall only be yours truly." Richtofen said with a smirk.

"Hooray! Nikolai agrees with everyone on doing mission involving killing evil men doing evil things! Is good day for Nikolai."

"Well teach, they've got enthusiasm." Claude said.

"That they do," Byleth said, "even if they are... quirky."

"If we are going to kill them all, then I suppose you're gonna help us do it in excruciating and drawn out ways of torment?" Richtofen said, an evil smile growing on his face.

"I'll tell you where they are. You try not to die."

"About time we get some action here! Oorah!" Dempsey got up.

"For honor!" Takeo spoke up.

"For devestion!" Richtofen shouted.

"For the motherland!" Nikolai said.

Byleth nodded, before turning to Claude. "By the way, Claude..."

"Yes?"

"We're going to need to talk."

"Oh..."

"Ha! You're in trouble~" Dempsey mockingly said, only to get slapped upside the head by Byleth. "Ow, fuck!"

"I'll talk with you four after you've dealt with those who slither in the dark."

"Oh nyet. We in trouble too. Is like school all over again, except this time it with Takeo. Much worse." Nikolai groaned.

"I'm dealing with a fucking moron, a psychopath and Takeo. What the fuck happened in my life to devolve into this mess?" Dempsey asked himself.

"I happened, you stupid American."

"Up yours, kraut!" Dempsey curtly replied with a one finger salute.

**2.12 Bet (by Awesomedude17)**

"Hey Teach, wanna bet on who you think will be next in our circle of Loopers?" Claude asked Byleth.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because something tells me that it's Dimitri."

"Him? Why him and not Edelgard? Isn't she far more important to this place?"

"I believe you on that, but Dimitri seems far more likely to be receptive to Looping than she would, if I'm being honest. She... is rather... interested in me, regardless of what house I choose, or what gender I am."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd rather not say."

Claude blinked before coming to a realization. "Oh... Yeah, I can see th- Wait? Regardless of gender?"

"Yes." Byleth prepared two proper responses depending on Claude's answer.

"So she's... Teacher-sexual?" Claude wiggled his eyebrows.

"New assignment, ballistics of various arrow materials available. My desk first thing tomorrow morning."

Claude looked at Byleth incredulously before sighing. "Fine, I guess I deserve that."

**2.13 Claude's Candid Camera (by Tetradrachm)**

"You're really sure this is a good idea, Claude?" Byleth asked. He'd found things in the Hub that he'd appreciated and Pocketed, like some nice, high quality fishing rods, but Claude apparently had bigger plans.

Claude fiddled with the camera, trying to turn it on. "Of course it is. You don't want to have precious memories of us and all our close friends saved forever on video? And trust me, I can definitely pass it off as a magical doodad from Almyra."

"Aren't Loop memories better in pretty much every way?"

"Yeah, but this way is more annoying, which makes it more fun." Claude lifted it up to his face. "Say hi, Teach!"

Byleth sighed in long-tested patience. "Hello, Claude."

"How're you doing?" Claude panned over Byleth's desk, where he was still sitting. "Getting ready for classes tomorrow?"

"I was writing up my curriculum when you barged in here, yes. I haven't nailed everything down that I plan for Harpstring Moon, but we need to cover a bit more strategy this month."

"Fascinating stuff, Teach." He zoomed in on Byleth's notes. "Yeah, I remember this section on strategy..."

"It's mostly the same things I teach every Loop, Claude," Byleth laughed. "You know it ten times over by now." His usual curriculum was basically perfected by now, so he'd gotten to changing it slightly each Loop based on recent Variants or trying different approaches to teaching.

"Nah, you throw new things in there often enough. I usually learn at least a few things each Loop. It's partly because our campaigns go differently each loop and you get new inspiration, right?"

"Not just our own. All across the world, there's a different military history, and sometimes the best tactics actually change from Variant stuff, too. You know, like how every once in a while some weapons work better against others?" Byleth pulled out a chart from among his notes. "We've got that weapon triangle again this time, I don't know if you noticed, but—"

"Oh yeah, yeah. I had a feeling after Hilda beat Dimitri on the training ground the other day without much trouble. That, and a bunch of the Almyran military campaigns I studied as a kid." He considered the chart for a few moments and Byleth was reminded of times he'd watched Claude consult maps of the terrain before a battle.

Then, abruptly, Claude's face fell and he clicked the camera off. "You know, Teach, that was another reason I got the idea to go around filming stuff. I saw this documentary in the Hub about a bunch of

languages that were dying out, about how scientists were working to record them, and it...it made me think of Almyra, how it changes each Loop, and how because of that each version vanishes completely. I'd like to try and record some of it each Loop, even just a bit of it, to not let it get lost forever. Do you know what I mean?"

Byleth stared at him intently. "I'll help you do it. I completely understand, I—my childhood changes each time, too. Sometimes I have friends in my father's mercenaries, and who they are and what they're like is always different. I understand trying to save their memories as best you can."

Claude beamed. "I knew you'd get it. You're a genius not just when it comes to tactics, but to emotional stuff too—you spent all of Baseline acting almost as a therapist for everyone at the Monastery!"

"If I can help, I will," Byleth shrugged. Then he frowned. "And you'll promise me that you won't cause any new emotional problems for my other students filming them?"

"I won't even try to film Bernie or Marianne, if that's what you mean." Byleth leveled a glare at him. "Okay, okay," Claude raised his arms in an appeasing gesture, "I'll be really...passive about it. I won't bug anyone—well, besides the worm bros, maybe."

"The worm—those who slither?" Byleth asked with astonishment. "What are you planning?"

"Now, now," Claude wagged a finger. "That would be telling."

—

"Nice place you got here!" Claude shouted down, one hand gripping his wyvern's reins and the other holding the camera upright. "There's a great panorama from this perspective, did you know that?"

"Attack the intruder!" and screams of panic echoed up from below, as the defenders of Shambhala tried in vain to attack with magic

missiles and flying fighters of their own. Claude had stocked himself up with half the monastery's potions and weapons before coming, but his Looping power made fighting everyone at once a breeze anyway. He dodged a pair blast, fired four arrows back in the blink of an eye, and collided bodily with one poor sod who crashed down to the rubble below. He swooped and attacked anyone who got close, doggedly approaching the center tower.

Finally, he reached the ritual platform and dropped off his faithful companion with a somersault up to standing surrounded by Agarthan mages. Quick work with a dagger finished them off without making him drop the camera, and he made sure to film himself activating the javelin's ritual as well.

"See, the problem is," Claude explained to the camera, "Shambhala's a really cool looking place, but it's so dark in here that it's hard to film. So, I decided to lighten it up down here. Don't worry, I made sure to evacuate everyone up above, and I used the smallest javelin I could—"

A massive explosion resounded above them, and the ground shook as a distant corner of the city collapsed under a colossal mound of earth and the sunlight streamed in over the rubble.

"Perfect," Claude announced as he hoisted the camera to film again. As he looked out over the sheer damage he'd caused, though, he decided he probably didn't need to tell his Teach about this at all.

**2.14 Shambhala, Fallen at 935 Cycles (by Awesomedude17)**

[FE:3H] / [Call of Duty Zombies: Aether] (continuation of 2.11)

Everything went wrong. Odesse was forced to take on the role of leader once Thales was assassinated. Solon was killed before the plans to trap Byleth was finalized, and Kronya was killed before Jeralt was assassinated. The latter two deaths also meant that their intel line was cut off. Their plans were literally hanging on by strings.

Fodlan had to be rid of Rhea and her ilk if Odesse was to claim any form of victory.

Looking over the people before him, he prepared to rally the troops.

As he opened his mouth, he felt something stab through his back and out his chest. As he coughed up blood, he looked down, but saw only the wound. He knew there was something there, but it was imperceptible to all. Whatever it was, it was pulled out, and he fell. The shadow dwellers quickly went into a panic as someone fell from the sky, laughing maniacally and slammed into the ground with a pair of strange spikes, lightning arcing into the troops with fury unseen by anyone. This was followed by someone coming in, a bizarre machine in his hand. It then breathed fire and bathed those who slithered in the dark in a bright heat.

The ones who could regroup decided that they needed to protect the Javelins of Light just in case the attackers somehow knew about their existence. They reached them in due time, only to find a strange device land by the devastating weapons, rapidly glowing with a strange heat. They only had enough time to look at the four assailants disappear into the ether before the device exploded in a powerful blast, causing the Javelins to detonate as well.

Shambhala had fallen before anyone could understand what just happened.

"AHAHAHAHAHA~! Destruction!" Richtofen laughed maniacally before finally taking note of Nikolai's Pocket contents. "Wait... what the..."

"You like, Richtofen? Is vodka factory run by servitors from Imperium place we were in. Remember?"

"Oh ja. The lobotomized cyborgs I uh... borrowed from the Emperor on the gilded toilet."

"Whatever honor you both had, it has washed away long ago." Takeo sadly shook his head.

"Right... hey, got anything to protect us from the radiation outside?" Dempsey asked a random servitor.

" *I enjoyed Steel Stiegman's -* " The servitor exploded.

"Oh nyet. Not again."

Dempsey groaned and turned to Richtofen, "I told you you should've waited for goddamn robots, Richtofen, but no~ You had to get the damn braindead men with machine bits out of them because you're the fucking psycho of the group! And as for you, tubby. Why you thought it was a good idea to have Richtofen lend these to you, I'll never know, because what goes through that vodka addled brain of yours is bullshit!"

"Who are you calling fat, Dempsey?" Nikolai glared at his American friend.

"Can we not just agree that what we just did was just... and fun?" Takeo tried to mediate.

"...Alright."

"I can get behind that."

"Oh ja. Those screams as the electricity danced in their veins." Richtofen sharply inhaled before repeating the last two words in a disturbingly aroused hiss.

" *I couldn't help but overhear that you needed to access a radioactive zone. I am Soviet-1918, owned by Nikolai Belinski as the head of operations and only one with any form of competence* ." Another servitor spoke up.

"Soviet-1918? Really Nikolai?"

"I am proud of the motherland, Dempsey. Do not judge me."

"Ja ja. So, what do you have?" Richtofen asked.

" *Safety orb. Carries up to eight people comfortably and opens up on the sides. Follow me* ."

"This better not be something stupid, Nikky." Takeo said.

"Is smarter than stupid original, Takeo. You can trust Nikolai."

Byleth, Jeralt and Seteth approached the cause of the massive explosion with a small expedition force in tow. Byleth knew that those men Claude had recruited had finished their mission to destroy those who slithered in the dark, so it was only a matter of time before he'd feel the need to tell Rhea about what happened.

That said, he wasn't expecting much.

"Hold on... I see something on the horizon." Seteth said.

"What is it?" Jeralt asked.

"It looks to be... an orb."

"An... orb?"

"Yes... and it appears to be approaching us."

"Why?"

"No idea." Byleth responded, thankful about his lack of emotions right now.

As the orb approached, the group began to hear... conversation.

" *Seriously, why the hell did you not put windows here* ?"

" *Because vision is always blurry, Dempsey. Vodka* ?"

" *Honestly, this is pretty stupid, Nikolai. More so than Dempsey* ."

" *Shove it, Richtofen* !"

" *Well is better than safe capsule by fat child... what is name? Porky? Might be Porky. He is safe in capsule, but cannot get out. Cannot do anything. Cannot move. Is stupid, so I ask bald engineer in hard hat, also American. Very smart. I tell him 'make orb like that, but less stupid' and he ask how. So I tell him 'make orb move and make so I can get out. Add vodka dispenser and seat eight people,' in case we meet other useses...eses* ."

" *How can we even tell that we are outside an unsafe area, Nikolai? Did you not think Takeo would not want to remain in this orb forever* ?"

" *Ugh, maybe I should get out and look* ."

" *Eh... I am not sure is best idea, Dempsey, and idea am coming from me* . * **URP** !*

"How about you four stay in there?" Seteth spoke up as the troops surrounded the orb.

" *...Uh... how much did you hear* ?" Dempsey spoke up.

"About the point where you started complaining about the various design flaws of this... thing." Jeralt said.

" *Ooooh, wunderbar, Nikolai. You made it so that we have no privacy as well. Round of applause, everyone. Round of applause* ." Richtofen said with sarcastic clapping, which were joined by two others.

" *Ah, fuck you. I am tired of your bullshit. Fire in hole* !" Nikolai grunted, before a loud, audible fart was released. Soon the other three occupants began to gag and cough as the sides opened up, and rushed out, and in Takeo's case, vomiting his guts out.

"It seems like they're no threat." Byleth remarked dully. "Let's take them back to the monastery."

"Ugh... Fuck my life." Dempsey said, coughing in disgust.

"That is what you get for being assholes." Nikolai said as he drank up the last of the contents of his bottle before passing out.

"My honor fades with my good smell!" Takeo moaned out before gagging again.

Byleth certainly was going to remember the sight of Seteth facepalming while his father shook his head in disbelief.

**2.15 All These Things That I've Done (by Tetradrachm)**

*Yes, it would be funny* , Byleth thought firmly, *but it wouldn't be worth the risk* .

"It wouldn't just be funny, it would be hilarious!" Sothis laughed as they walked together, patrolling one of the monastery's hallways early on their second morning there. It was one of their regular tasks as a professor (joint professors, as Sothis insisted) and Byleth found he liked the regularity of it at the start of a new Loop to center him again.

*She isn't physically strong enough to bear it. I'm not even sure she'd last long on the battlefield wearing the heavy armor* , Byleth pointed out.

"Ugh, fine," Sothis huffed. "But still, can you imagine it? You'd only barely be able to see her inside one of those huge suits of armor since they're all too big for her!"

Byleth smiled faintly. *Alright, we can maybe have Lysithea try on a Fortress Knight suit of armor and take a picture or something—*

One of the doors lining the hall opened and a bleary Dimitri stumbled out, still in his nightclothes. He looked around wildly before spotting

Byleth and gasped.

"Dimitri?" Byleth asked carefully. "Are you alright?" Sothis examined him critically, floating around him where he stood.

"You're Byleth," Dimitri said uncertainly, "but—oh, things change sometimes, that's right, I—" His gaze sharpened. "Are you, um, Awake?"

Byleth's stomach flipped and Sothis gasped. "I'm not asleep...but do you mean in a Loopy sense?" the professor asked.

"Yes!" Dimitri stepped forward, uncertain. "I suppose I have...just Activated. I didn't expect it, but..."

"You've already heard the Speech, though?" Byleth was very confused. "How do you already know about the Loops?"

Dimitri took a deep breath. "Professor, do you...remember Sayori?"

Byleth's mouth fell open.

Everyone was quiet, but for different reasons.

Byleth took a sip of his tea and eyed Dimitri as he did the same, watching him for any sign of his thoughts. Claude sat in bleary, barely wakefulness with them, half-slumped and ignoring his tea entirely in favor of watching Dimitri as well. Sothis floated at the fourth corner of the table they'd found in a corner of the library, face impassive as she looked between all of them.

Dimitri had been muttering to himself occasionally as they'd walked here but now he was completely silent and almost motionless besides taking the tea. Byleth had just picked a random flavor for the both of them, since it didn't matter to Dimitri anyway, but now he was regretting not choosing something with a bit more of a pick-me-up effect; he wasn't dazed like Claude but he was certainly tired as well. He was more concerned by Dimitri, though; he would have expected

Dimitri to at least have some questions, to ask Claude and himself about what had happened in the years since Baseline, but he was quiet, and Byleth didn't know why.

"You don't all need to watch over me like this," Dimitri said finally, putting down the tea. "I appreciate your concern, but I just...need some time to think."

"Understandable," Claude pronounced, leaning back. "It took me a while to wrap my head around everything, too. It's a whole new world—everything is different, all our priorities kind of go straight out the window. It's..." He trailed off with a sigh. "It gets easier."

"Part of it is that I already have two sets of memories," Dimitri admitted with a half-laugh. "Some sort of, I believe the word is Variant?" Byleth and Claude nodded. "A Variant where, well, everything went wrong. Edelgard betrayed the monastery and the rest of Fódlan in a...a horrible war that lasted for five years, and you went missing, Professor, and—"

Byleth felt the color drain from his face. "That's not a Variant, Dimitri. That's...I'm sorry, that's our Baseline. We didn't, Sayori couldn't have known then, but we've seen our Hub Backup, and it's all supposed to happen."

Dimitri looked more confused than anything at first, but then a shadow passed over his face. "All of that...actually happened? Everything I did?" He exhaled shakily and grabbed the table for support. "How did I even Activate? I don't deserve to Loop!"

"What?" Byleth and Claude both spoke at the same time.

"If it's Baseline, then you know what I did. All of it! The Boar Prince, I was...I am...a monster."

Claude leaned forward, sympathy clear in his expression. "But you surpassed it, Dimitri. You overcame a series of horrible

circumstances—seriously, I had no idea how bad you had it in Baseline—and became a good king."

Dimitri didn't seem to hear him, even as he stared back at Claude. "Do you know how much blood I have on my hands? Do you know...who I killed?" The way he emphasized that phrase gave Byleth a bad feeling.

"You don't think I killed way more than my fair share, the first few times around? Even after that?" Claude was deadly serious, and definitely awake, now. "We're killers, Dimitri, it's a fact of life, but fact is that you came back to yourself after falling into a really dark place because of it all...you're stronger than I am, that's for sure."

"And as the Anchor, I've killed more people than both of you put together," Byleth finally managed to insert himself into the conversation. He hadn't liked the negative way Claude and Dimitri's thoughts seemed to be going, and judging by the small grateful look from Sothis he suspected his Co-Anchor agreed with him. "Yes, we kill. And yes, I've fallen into the trap of thinking that more killing will somehow solve things—you remember the Sealed Forest?" Dimitri nodded hesitantly. "And on top of that, all of Fódlan was being manipulated by the Slitherers into making that conflict happen. It's not your fault, Dimitri."

"I didn't even know those who slither existed in Baseline," Dimitri suddenly realized with horror. "How did we miss it? By the goddess, they were still out there at the end of the war!"

"We killed Arundel at Derdriu, remember?" Byleth said. "With him gone, I'm pretty sure their influence collapsed, and he was the one that worked the javelins, too."

"Yeah, you actually handled that part better than I did, in my Baseline," Claude continued. "In mine, not only did we have to go to Shambhala and destroy their forces, but we didn't clean it up good enough and, well, you won't believe this, but they had the King of Liberation himself as a zombie down there and—"

"Your Baseline?" Now Dimitri looked totally lost.

"Oh." Claude frowned. "Yeah, Baseline can go...a few different ways. Byleth, at the very beginning, can choose any of the three houses at Garreg Mach to teach, and from there things spiral out, all the way to the war."

"They're all equal," Byleth said hastily. "Everyone at the Academy has their reasons for what they do, and the problem with Baseline is that no one ever gets all the information they need, so people make decisions they'd really regret if they only knew."

"Edelgard," Dimitri breathed out. "You sided with Edelgard in her conquests, in one of the Baselines?"

Byleth could only nod. Sothis growled in frustration, "You're not doing a very good job of explaining yourself!"

"And they sided with me, in my own conquest," Claude spoke up harshly. Dimitri flinched in surprise. "Yeah, in Baseline when Byleth joins my house it's the Alliance that comes out on top in Fódlan. I had good motives, but I won't sugarcoat that we waged a war of conquest together."

"I don't hold it against you," Dimitri said, voice hoarse. "At least they all stayed sane—I still can hardly believe you stayed by my side when I was a rabid beast!"

Sothis huffed and rummaged for something in their shared Pocket. "You weren't a rabid beast, Dimitri," Byleth tried, "you were the victim of horrible events outside your control."

"It was my choice to kill," Dimitri growled, "never someone else's. I was the one who slaughtered without a thought, who murdered Leonie and Ignatz for no damn reason at Gronder Field!"

"Enough!" Sothis almost screamed out loud through the radio she'd unPocketed. The whole table nearly jumped, Byleth included—he'd

forgotten she'd picked up this little trick. "Your friends are trying to comfort you, to explain that they still accept you, and you are refusing them without even trying to hear them out!" Dimitri stared at the radio, mouth agape. "Use your common sense and see that you have done nothing that cannot be forgiven! You will only cause more pain and suffering if you refuse to move on!"

"Sothis," Byleth finally said weakly, "he doesn't even know who you are."

There was a moment of utter silence, and then Claude burst into uproarious laughter. Dimitri sagged, face pale, and even Sothis looked slightly abashed. Byleth resisted the temptation to smack his hand into his face.

"How...what...you're the progenitor god," Dimitri almost whispered. "Is that your true form?"

"Your true form," Claude gasped. "Oh man, this is hilarious!"

"Claude," Byleth said sharply. "How would he know better?" Claude had the decency to take his turn looking embarrassed.

"No, this is not my true form," Sothis explained. "Thanks to a Variant where I was an actual ghost, I gained the ability to possess certain objects. This radio can create sound, so I can use it to talk to you, or rather, to knock some sense into your head!"

"I suppose you're right," Dimitri allowed, still visibly shaken. "Thank you, all of you, I...this is all so overwhelming, and I don't even...know what to do now."

"Well, first things first," Claude said with a yawn and a smile, "let's have some coffee. The good stuff, I've got a bunch of it Pocketed from the Hub—it'll wake us all up, even if you can't taste it."

"We just live our normal lives, is what Claude's saying," Byleth explained. "Take however long you want to figure things out, and you

can do whatever you want—we'll be here for you."

"Thank you," Dimitri said with a small smile.

As they all got up to leave by unspoken agreement, Claude chuckled, "Radio Sothis, the new hit station!"

"Call me that again and I'll possess your bow."

"I dunno, wouldn't that just make my bow specially blessed by the goddess?"

Sothis growled wordlessly.

# Chapter 3

(Awesomedude17) (Warhammer 40K x Fire Emblem: Three Houses x Bar Loop)

### 3.1 Tasteful or Tasteless?

The Bar Loop: the quintessential vacation Loop for all Loopers, whether stressful or relaxed.

Commissar Ciaphas Cain ( **HERO OF THE IMPERIUM** ) knew this better than anyone. That said, he wasn't here in C-3PO's bar to get drunk. No, he did that last week.

Instead, he had his usual brew of tanna. Jurgen was out doing some errands for him so he was by himself.

He knew eventually someone would sit by him, and that came in the form of a blue-eyed blonde man and a curiously teal haired man sitting down by him when there were no other seats. Small talk wouldn't be bad, to be honest.

"Haven't seen either of you before. Newcomers?"

"Yes. I just Activated not that long ago. Dimitri Alexandre Blaiddyd, crown prince of the Holy Kingdom of Faerghus."

"Byleth Eisner, traveling mercenary, teacher, and Anchor to Fodlan."

Cain smirked. "Commissar Ciaphas Cain of the Dark Millenium Branch. Haven't heard much about Fodlan before. Might have to look into it."

"Wouldn't hurt." Dimitri said.

"Is that tea?" Byleth asked.

"Yes. A special brew I've taken a liking to. Tanna, I find it to be quite delicate."

"May we try some?"

"Are you sure?"

"Couldn't hurt."

Ciaphas shrugged as he took out a couple of cups and poured in some tanna for the two. He fully expected them to gag.

He was half right. Byleth immediately gagged and nearly spat it out. Dimitri however sipped it down like it was nothing.

Dimitri finished taking a sip and looked Cain dead in the eyes, "Well, you clearly have a sense of humor, and my Professor clearly dislikes the tea."

"Well do you?"

"Wouldn't know. Can't taste anything."

Caiphas stared for the longest before breaking out in laughter. "I like you already, Dimitri. Sorry about that, Mister Eisner."

Byleth straightened himself out and nodded. "Well, I will say this. It's as delicate as solid steel."

Cain shrugged before taking another sip of his Tanna. "It is an acquired taste, though having no taste at all seems to help."

"Apparently," Dimitri replied.

(Awesomedude17) (Fire Emblem: Three Houses)

### 3.2 Void Scenario #2

Byleth Awoke just as he was sent into a dark void by Solon, again.

With a sigh, he looked around, and soon was face to face with himself... or rather, herself.

"What path did you go down?" He asked.

"The path of the Kingdom. You?"

Byleth looked into his Memories, and replied, "The path of the Empire, although I've apparently been very much not agreeing with Edelgard this time through."

She sighed. "This will be a regular thing. I can just feel it in my very being."

"Of course. Yggdrasil." He replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Although to be fair, to them, it was.

(Awesomedude17) (Fire Emblem: Three Houses)

**3.3 I See**

"Well Dimitri, this is the first time we're actually alone to discuss things." Claude started off as he took out his archery kit. "Perhaps you can tell me more about that special variant Teach told me about, because there's no way she knew everything."

"I suppose. From what I can tell, Sayori replaced Marianne, and considering who Marianne is like, I honestly can see why." Dimitri replied as he approached Claude.

"Well, let's start off with anything you have done with her."

"She has proven herself to be a rather unorthodox sword fighter. She trades lethality for unpredictability but with the proper weaponry, it's not really much of an issue."

"Apparently, it involves something call the Force, and she been trying to adapt to 'real steel' blades, as Teach told me. I actually decided to look into what Sayori was, and found this series, Star Wars. I'm definitely going to show you every single thing about that, because episodes four through six are great."

"What about one through three?"

"Eh...politics."

Dimitri shook his head.

Claude pulled back the bowstring and took aim. Unfortunately, he failed to notice the flaws of it, and it snapped. Claude reeled back in pain for only a moment, only to notice Dimitri shouting out in pain. He quickly saw Dimitri grasping at a bloody wound on his right eye, and immediately went to get Mercedes.

"I'm sorry, Dimitri, but we weren't able to save the eye." Mercedes said with regret.

Dimitri scoffed. "Wonderful. Simply wonderful."

"I said I was sorry!" Claude said.

"It was an accident, Claude. I don't exactly blame you, but I do think you should take better care of your equipment to prevent it from happening again."

"I swear, you're both like children I have to watch over constantly sometimes." Byleth groaned out.

"It's hard being a healer. I really do care, Professor, but sometimes the feeling tends to be the same." Mercedes replied in response.

(Tetradrachm) (FE:3H)

**3.4 Who It's All For**

"It wouldn't be a stretch to say you're down here every single night now, would it?"

Claude's question hung in the air as he leaned against the entrance to the training grounds, almost casual. Dimitri matched his gaze levelly, the shredded training dummies and their emptied fillings around him almost giving the impression that he stood in a pile of snow.

"No, you would just be correct." Dimitri slid his training lance down from hoisting it to standing it upright. "Every Loop, I have to train hard to get back into combat-ready shape. It's...I don't have anything better to do."

"What about your house? The Blue Lions are all doing well? You haven't needed to help them train?" Claude could sense a strain behind Dimitri's expression, and given that he'd only rarely even seen him this Loop something was probably up with him. He hadn't really opened up about much to him—maybe to Byleth, he knew they'd spoken a few times in the handful of Loops they'd had since Dimitri Activated—and Claude wanted to know why.

"Yes, part of my training is working with them too. None of them want to train so long each day as I do, though."

"Not even Felix?" Claude tried to joke.

What very little levity there was in Dimitri's expression vanished. "Felix still wants nothing to do with me beyond a few short, vicious spars every so often. He...well, I've managed to reconcile with him a few times, but it's hard this early on." He sighed deeply. "He doesn't really believe that I've come to terms with who I am."

Claude steeled himself. "Who are you, Dimitri?"

"I'm just a man doing what needs to be done." Claude hadn't expected Dimitri to be so quick with an answer, and his own surprise must have been clear on his face because Dimitri continued quickly,

"I've thought about it. I came to terms with myself during Baseline, but I've had to do it all over again with time repeating, and with what I learned during my...other first Loop."

"That Fused Loop you had?" Dimitri being so quick with his answer had rattled Claude, because it made him realize he wasn't sure about his own answer to that question. A quick topic shift was his way out of that uncomfortable realization. "That must've been a wild experience. I'm kinda jealous, honestly. I haven't met any outside Loopers yet."

"It wasn't really that strange." Dimitri seemed almost embarrassed, now. "She was very gracious and cautious in trying to explain things to us, and she...wasn't some unknowable goddess. She was still completely human."

"You're not implying something about our draconic friends—" Claude started with a smirk.

"No, Claude, not at all! Human as in behavior, not human as in...oh, I don't know, I've never much studied philosophy."

"Well, we've got all the time we want to study that stuff now."

Dimitri didn't visibly react to that, instead hefting the lance up again and giving it a once-over. "But it's not enough time, is it?" he asked quietly.

Claude sighed. Now they were maybe getting somewhere—but he was suddenly less eager to carry on with the conversation than he had been originally. Looping Dimitri was way more self-aware than he usually was in Baseline, he realized, and it had really caught him off guard. "Not enough time to accomplish much? Yeah."

"No, there is enough time, but...grh, yes, it isn't enough," Dimitri almost growled. Claude could see a hint of his old rage in his face. "I can make things right with everyone, stop the monsters in Shambhala, and start to move Fódlan forward, but before that's even

done it all resets, and—" He cut himself off, slamming his jaw shut as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. For a moment, he just stood there, almost motionless, and Claude watched him warily. "My apologies," he said, eyes still closed.

"You okay?" Claude checked carefully. He finally set his bow down, which he'd been holding awkwardly this whole time, and relaxed enough to notice that Dimitri was already recovered. A little less tense than before, even.

"I'm better now. Thank you, Claude, and I...appreciate you being concerned. Sayori taught me some methods of working through my anger, like counting in my head. That was what I was doing just now...it helps that I'm not so much angry as just frustrated, I suppose."

"Let us help," Claude said earnestly. Dimitri blinked at him with surprise, so he explained, "If you want to see your plans for Fódlan come to fruition, you basically have to get started as soon as possible at the beginning of each Loop. Byleth always takes care of the troglodytes when they're Awake, but the politics? The managing to hammer our world into something new, and good? They're willing to help us put our plans into action—they've helped me forge a brighter Fódlan in, like, less than a year. And I know you're a good person with good ideas, I'll work with you to revolutionize Fódlan right now, and in the future, too."

Dimitri lifted his eyebrows, and for the first time he almost smiled. "What, right now?"

"I can see it's bugging you right now. Sure, it's late,"—well past midnight, actually—"but that's doesn't stop us from getting started with a plan for reform and how to get it, right? Like the big picture stuff: how do you feel about the idea of a constitution?"

Dimitri actually laughed at that. "Goddess, Claude, you want to talk politics in the training grounds?"

"I mean, if you want to...but no, I was just trying to figure out what you want to do. You want to help everyone, and so do I. If we work together—and get Byleth and Sothis in on it too—we can accomplish so much more, you can see that, right?"

"I know that, I was just being stubborn. And foolish."

"Hey, being too stubborn makes for good leadership. You just have to know when to let it go, sometimes." Claude thought with a pang of Hilda, who might have pestered him about the very same thing if he told her what was going on. But he had the same problem Dimitri did, of having a hard time putting in the effort reconnecting with her every Loop. Then again, one day she would Loop, and it wasn't like he didn't still care about her. "What you said before, about doing what needs to be done...it's for them, isn't it? For the Blue Lions," he continued. "For everyone else, too, but for them especially...because it's the same for me and the Golden Deer."

"That's exactly it," Dimitri said seriously. "And I know the professor feels the same way about all of us. We all share almost the exact same goal, and it isn't good to shoulder that responsibility on our own if we can help it. I learned that lesson in Baseline, too." He finally cracked a small smile. "So about that constitution idea..."

(Zum1UDontNo) (Awesomedude17) (FE:3H)

### 3.5 The Crimson Reckoning, Part 1

Edelgard looked over the balcony of her home as the sun set. Repairing the damage that her campaign of liberation had done would take a while, but at least the Church of Seiros was now gone. The beasts that had ruled Fódlan from the shadows were gone.

It was regretful that Dimitri had to die too, but there was no avoiding that. There was no avoiding much of anything. She had managed to spare several of her opponents- Lysithea, Claude, Seteth and Flayn came to mind- but every war had casualties.

At least those who slithered in the dark fell quickly. Jeritza and Hubert, along with many others, had made sure of that.

"El? Is something the matter?"

She looked at the source of the question, and smiled. Byleth. When she met her, she found someone who would be her professor. Someone who would help her make the connections she needed to make. Someone who would be the one who helped her in her time of need, and chose to take her path.

Someone she found true love in.

"Just... worried about the future, my teacher."

"I keep telling you not to call me that anymore. We're much more than that now."

"I've been calling you that for the past five years. It's hard to get out of the habit."

Byleth smiled gently. "Could you try? I know you're not one to stick to habits for the sake of tradition."

"I..." Edelgard's smile grew to match. "I can try... my love."

Byleth's smile in response rivaled the setting sun.

"I hope Ferdinand is up to his position," Edelgard said, looking back over the balcony. "He's... certainly enthusiastic. He's wanted to be Prime Minister for a long time."

"Indeed, though part of that was to make right what his father did wrong." Byleth glanced at her from the corner of her eye. "Do you remember when he was obsessed with rivaling you?"

Edelgard snorted, covering her mouth politely. "Oh, those were the days. Although, he hasn't changed that much. He's dropped the rivalry, but he's still challenging my ideas."

"And do you wish he wouldn't?"

"No, I don't. I need someone like him who'll force me to consider other points of view. Truth be told, I don't know where I'd be without him." Beside her, Byleth nodded approvingly. "He and Hubert both support me in different ways, but I don't think I could do without either of them."

"Speaking of Hubert," Byleth said, "how do you think he and Bernadetta are doing now?"

Edelgard shook her head in mild exasperation. "Just when you think you know someone, they completely subvert your expectations. Who could have known he and Bernadetta would get married?"

Byleth said nothing.

"My t- ...my love," Edelgard corrected herself, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Did you expect this? Did you see the possibility of them together?"

"Back at the Monastery," Byleth chuckled. "There was a reason I always assigned them to stable duty together."

Edelgard sighed, though her lips creeped up at the corners. "You will never cease to astound me, I swear."

"I'm glad. It's good to have someone to keep you on your feet." Byleth's smile turned into a concerned frown. "But, on the subject of their marriage, are you tired at all?"

Edelgard shook her head, though it was clear she was suppressing a yawn. "Not at all, don't worry yourself. But I am surprised. Their reception was quite the event. Rather unexpected for both of them."

"And you're one to talk, Edelgard von Hresvelg?"

Edelgard's cheeks reddened. "I- our wedding was that big because of how politically important it was! I couldn't settle for anything less."

"Just because you're the Emperor?" Byleth asked.

"No, not just that," Edelgard responded. "We... we're both women. We can't have children with each other, not biological children. And we both have rare Crests, so those Crests will likely be lost to history. It's... important that that statement be made as big as possible."

"Out with the old, in with the new," Byleth murmured. She turned to look at the setting sun, which was just barely peeking over the horizon. In a matter of minutes, night would fall across Fódlan. "I suppose that would be an important statement."

Edelgard nodded, before looking away bashfully. "And... I thought you deserved it. With how... important you are to me." She looked up to Byleth, who had turned again to meet her gaze. "In my eyes, you didn't deserve any less than the best I could offer you as Emperor."

"Oh, El," Byleth sighed, pulling Edelgard close to her. She leaned in and placed a kiss on her forehead, gentle as the wind brushing against a rose of the deepest crimson. "I love you, El, not just Edelgard the Adrestian Emperor. You are enough."

Edelgard leaned into her touch, closing her eyes in bliss. While she had her doubts, Byleth has reaffirmed her to one thing.

Everything was going to be okay.

As the sun finally slipped past the mountains and cast the Empire in night, Edelgard-

Was jolted out of her relaxed state by a loud racket. She looked around in a panic, no longer feeling Byleth's arms around her.

*What- where am I? Where's-*

Her line of thought, rushed and confused and jumping from one fact to the next, was interrupted by a shout of rage. She turned to see

Kostas-

*Kostas? But he's long- why do I feel-*

Running toward her, his axe-

*I need to move, he's coming towards-*

Raised in the air, as he barreled-

*Aymr, I still have Aymr on my- I don't have my-*

Right at her, pulsing veins visible on his face.

*What is going on?!*

"You'll die!" He roared. Edelgard found herself frozen, a thousand thoughts- *where's Byleth move fight swing back where's Aymr where's Hubert where's Byleth run away go for the knees get my dagger where's Byleth* - racing through her head. But out of the corner of her eye, she saw a figure rushing towards her-

*Byleth!*

Byleth ran in front of her and drew her sword, positioning herself between Edelgard and Kostas. From what Edelgard could see, the bandit had adjusted his grip to prepare to swing at Byleth instead.

He swung down, Byleth raised her sword, and Edelgard leapt.

She didn't know what she was doing; her legs moved before anything else. In that single frozen moment, she had to decide what to do.

Her gut was telling her to run, that Byleth was strong enough to handle Kostas.

Her mind was overrun with hundreds of questions and worries.

But her heart only said one thing.

*NO!*

In one swift motion, she shoved her beloved out of the way of the blow. In the same action, she pulled her dagger from its sheath and gritted her teeth. The axe screamed its way into her chest, right as she lunged her arm forward. The dagger cleared the distance between her and Kostas, and sunk into his neck. He gurgled for a moment, before slowly toppling backwards.

The clearing was suddenly silent.

It was just her and Byleth.

Her, her love, and the axe lodged in her chest.

It was... odd. She had expected to feel pain, or perhaps anger. Maybe even satisfaction. But instead...

She only felt... tired. Very tired.

She felt arms around her, and looked up to see Byleth- her love, her darling- holding her up, gaping down at her. Her face twitched, as if she was trying to cast magic and failing.

With the last of her strength, Edelgard reached up. Gently, so soft she could barely feel it on her own hand, she cupped Byleth's cheek. She only had a moment to admire her, before her vision darkened and blurred. She really was so... so tired...

Looking up at her love... She supposed there were worse ways to die.

Her arm fell to her side as her head tilted back. Her eyes sliding shut, Edelgard-

Was jolted out of her relaxed state by a loud racket. She looked around in a panic, no longer feeling Byleth's arms around her.

*What the- again?!*

"You'll die!"

She turned her head and saw Kostas- again- running towards her. She took a hasty step back and pulled her dagger from her sheath-

-and froze, as a man lunged into view and threw his sword like a javelin. The blade pierced the bandit's side, and he collapsed to the ground mid-stride like a sack of potatoes.

Edelgard blinked, looking up. A man, someone who looked vaguely familiar, looked down at her.

"It's unconventional, I'll admit," he said, "but it's good for when you're out of options."

"I..." Edelgard couldn't respond. Everything about him- his hair, his face, his voice- reminded her of, well, her. Of Byleth.

He got a concerned look. She only just realized that she was almost gawking at him. "Are you alright?"

"Y-yes. I am."

The strange man looked at her intently, before something lit up in his eyes.

"Edelgard, has time been repeating for you?"

"Wait a-" Something clicked in Edelgard's mind. "My... my t- lo- ...teacher? Is that-"

"Yes, yes I am. I'll explain later." He gestured for her to follow him. "I had a feeling this would happen soon. Hopefully the others are Awake too. We need to talk."

If Edelgard was confused before, she was absolutely baffled now. What in the world was happening?

(Awesomedude17) (FE:3H x Metal Gear)

**3.6 Tortured Paths**

Byleth noticed two things off from Dimitri. One was that he was obviously Awake. Two was that he was notably more irritable. Naturally, Byleth decided that she needed to talk to him.

"Is something the matter, Dimitri?"

Dimitri looked at Byleth and sighed.

"I'm still reeling from a recent Fused Loop I came back from. All I can say is that I'm now thoroughly convinced that Yggdrasil loves to take away my right eye."

Byleth blinked. "How so?"

"Let me skip ahead the story. I'll tell it in bits and pieces because it's a multi-decade story involving machines of war, microtechnology, conspiracy and ridiculous situations that all result in me dying in a cemetery as an old man. This is near the beginning in the year... 1964 in Hub years?" Byleth nodded. "Hub year 1964."

Dimitri felt the electricity pulse through his body. The bag over his head meant that he couldn't anticipate when the next move of this torture was coming.

And then he was punched. Over and over again.

He tuned out the discussion between the Boss, or rather, a female Byleth. Revolver Ocelot was Dedue, and Eva was clearly a dead ringer for Ingrid.

"Ruin him, just as he did the Cobras!" Volgin demanded.

Dimitri's breathing got heavy as he found Byleth raising her knife, ready to take out his left eye.

It got uncomfortably close before Ingrid ran up and pulled Byleth's arm away, yelling 'Stop!'

"What is it Tanya?" Volgin demanded.

"He's suffered enough!"

"Well well..." Dedue said, walking towards Ingrid. "Why are you protecting him?"

Dedue then suddenly leaned in to smell her, and grinned.

"Tatyana... You're the spy!"

"What are you talking about?"

Dedue took in another smell, and raised his hand. "I know that smell..." Dedue grabbed Ingrid, and then got slapped.

Dimitri was really not sure what to think right now, but then again, he was only barely conherant given the fact that he was beaten and bruised.

"Taken a fancy to her, eh, Ocelot?"

"No, I have no interest in this woman." Dedue took out his revolver and loaded it. "I want to test her. I'll let this be the judge."

Volgin grinned. "Do as you like."

Dedue took out two more guns and juggled them. Dimitri knew that this was a stupid, stupid thing to do, and clearly knew that this was an accident waiting to happen. Even worse, he occasionally took aim at Ingrid. Dimitri tried to protect her and shoved himself into his friend who was not himself.

Dedue's gun soon went off. The flash immediately burst his right eye, blinding him. Dimitri snarled out in pain.

AGH! AGAIN!

Things blurred and all he could recall at that moment was Volgin and Byleth leaving. Dedue then gave his very worrying thoughts of how torture was the ultimate form of expression.

Byleth then walked up to him, and shot him though the leg before giving him a gun, saying only one word.

"Run!"

Once Byleth left, Ingrid walked up to him, and explained to him what to do next.

Go out and head west. Pass the connecting passageway and go north. An open manhole. North entrance of the sewers was unlocked. He could get out that way. She had his gear.

He blacked out as the guards came in.

"That... is quite uncomfortable." Byleth admitted.

Dimitri scoffed. "Professor..." Dimitri looked at her in the eyes. "That was far from the worst thing I went through. Believe me."

Byleth said nothing.

"That said, I did gain a strange appreciation for... cardboard boxes. It was as if I was meant to hide... in the box."

Byleth nodded along.

*What in the world is Dimitri talking about?*

(Zum1UDontNo) (Awesomedude17) (FE:3H)

**3.7 The Crimson Reckoning, Part 2 (3.5 cont.)**

Byleth had set up a tent for him and Edelgard to have a private conversation with these others. She was seriously on the verge of a panic attack with everything that happened to her in the past ten minutes, going from kissing her beloved, to taking an axe to protect said beloved in the past, to said beloved now being a... quite handsome man, in all honesty. She honestly considered him to be as attractive as when he was a she.

That was somehow one of the least confusing things on her mind.

*Ugh... My head.*

"You must be having a rough time. Trust me, I did too. Come in."

Edelgard walked in, rubbing her temples when she caught sight of Dimitri and Claude sitting around a table. She tried to turn around, only to get stopped by Byleth's outstretched hand.

"Sit. Now."

Edelgard blinked before deciding not to push it.

"So, she's finally Awake?" Dimitri asked.

"Yes, and I guess she Awoke from when I was a woman," Byleth said as the two sat down.

"Wait, that actually-"

"Yes, it did," Claude interrupted Edelgard. "And yes, it was awkward for us when something similar to your thing happened."

Dimitri sighed before taking out a cigar and a match before lighting up.

"So, how'd you figure it out?"

"She didn't make the same surprised face as usual. It looked far more panicked and confused." Byleth turned away from them to take

out a radio, before continuing. "I'll be honest, though. It's the second time I've asked if she was going through time. She was Unawake the first time."

Edelgard looked at the strange object Byleth took out and messed with it as static blared from it. Edelgard felt uneasy with it as she watched her teacher mess with it.

"Alright, can you say anything now?"

"More or less," came a feminine voice, straight from the device.

"Who is that?" Edelgard demanded.

"Hello there, Edelgard. My name is Sothis. You may know me as the patron goddess of the Church of Seiros. I'm sure you're very familiar with Rhea already, or rather Seiros... my daughter."

Edelgard blinked repeatedly as she just processed all of this information.

"Trust us, this is not the weirdest thing we saw," Claude said. "It's somewhere on the top ten, I'd say, but not the weirdest."

"Yeah, that orb was definitely something else. Even that will be overshadowed eventually, though."

"Orb?" Edelgard replied, confused. What were they talking about?

Byleth shook his head, "Long story. We've got a lot to cover. Dimitri?"

Dimitri, with a weary sigh, straightened himself in his seat.

"So, you remember what happened?"

"I remember uniting Fódlan in conquest."

Dimitri took a long drag of his cigar before exhaling. "And I remember being forced to kill you when you tried to kill me with that

dagger I gave you."

"With that…" Edelgard's brows furrowed. "First, you killed me?"

"Yes."

Edelgard didn't fully understand how she could still be here if he killed her, and she didn't remember being killed at all... Beyond taking an axe to the chest about 10 minutes ago. But, given that she remembered killing Dimitri, she supposed she didn't have much room to talk. That just left the other thing. "That dagger... wait, do you mean-"

"You have it right now." Dimitri pointed at the dagger on Edelgard's person. "Did you not remember in your timeline?"

"I… suppose I…" Edelgard pulled the dagger out of its sheath, looking it over curiously. "So that noble in Faerghus… was you?"

Dimitri glowered at Edelgard for a moment, before taking another drag of his cigar. "For all you forgot, I also remember being killed by you whenever the Professor joined your side on those occasions. And there's those times when the Professor..."

Byleth hung his head and shook it in remorse.

"Sometimes, we do things we regret, Edelgard," Sothis said. "Even I'm not blameless. Still, given that you worked with the people who killed me-"

"I had to!" Edelgard shouted.

"Did you?"

Edelgard glared at the radio. Everyone could tell that Sothis couldn't help but have a bit of animosity towards Edelgard for what she did to her family.

Dimitri knew exactly the kind of thing to distract the others from this tense moment.

"I also recall losing an eye in most Loops."

Edelgard was knocked out of her haze by that comment, "What? I don't recall that either."

"Because Rhea helped me when the Professor joined you."

"Right, but every other time, he loses an eye. The right one, right?" Dimitri affirmed Claude's inquiry with a firm nod. "Right then... Should I stop saying r-"

"Get on with it, Claude," Sothis spoke up.

"Sorry, sorry." Claude cleared his throat. "So, when Teach joins me, when he joins Dimitri, and yes, when he joins Rhea too, Dimitri loses his right eye." Claude shook his head. "Get used to really bad timelines, Edelgard. There are times where I'm executed during your time to shine." He paused. "You did spare me, right?"

"Of course I- Wait, Rhea?" Edelgard wheeled back. "The Church of Seiros? The Immaculate One?! My teacher?"

Byleth looked at the betrayed look in Edelgard's eyes, and sighed heavily.

"Edelgard, it's time we told you what's happening."

"Four timelines and I'm the choice that is the least certain." Edelgard shook her head. "All because of her. Rhea..."

"Edelgard! Enough!" Byleth said. "We've all had some hardships of our own. Dimitri even went through a... frankly bizarre Loop that still was hard for him recently."

Dimitri rubbed his right eye in response while muttering under his breath. Edelgard caught something about war never changing, metal

gears and some person named Zeke.

"Whether we like it or not, we're in this together."

"Especially regarding the possibility that we probably won't be a five person club of Loopers for long," Sothis admitted. "Who knows who could be next? Rhea, Jeralt… it could be Dimitri's friend for all we know. Dedue."

"Even then, it'll be rough for them too," Claude said.

Byleth put a hand on Edelgard's shoulder. "But we do have a way to make things right, to ensure that no one but those who stole your family suffers."

Edelgard stiffened, before backing away from Byleth.

"My teacher, with all due respect, I'd like it if you'd-"

"They already know. You told me because you trusted me enough to share this information with me." Byleth lowered his gaze in sympathy, or perhaps remorse. Perhaps both. "The others here learned on their own."

Edelgard looked at him, before growling in frustration and burying her face in her hands.

"I can't even stay mad at you. I just can't. You and I, we were so close... and then... and after that I took an axe for you... and..."

"Wait, this is your second Loop through?" Claude asked.

"You were Awake for that?" Byleth sighed. "In hindsight, that makes sense. No wonder that Loop felt more grim than usual."

"Ooooooo..." Everyone could tell that Sothis was cringing, even if only Byleth could see her.

"You love him, don't you, Edelgard?" Dimitri said.

The silence was so thick, you could cut it with a knife. Everyone could tell that this was a touchy subject.

"Yeah, guess this is my cue to leave." Claude cracked a grin, which Edelgard could only barely tell was strained. "Last time I was in a place this tense, you defeated me and I was at your mercy."

"Weren't you at my mercy several times?"

"Yeah, but Teach was the one who called the shots there, so it's on him instead," Claude said with a shrug as Byleth gave him an annoyed look. "Me, I've got little skin in the game, so to speak, so I hope you and Dimitri get to, uh, not killing each other regularly. I'll be seeing you."

Claude quickly left. Dimitri rolled his eyes before walking up to Edelgard. "I will be frank with you. Everything you've done, from joining those people who destroyed damn near everything I cared about back in the Tragedy of Duscar to the many times we've had to kill each other to the simple fact that you brought war to Fódlan, it makes it incredibly hard for me to forgive you, but despite all that, despite the fact that I have every single reason to declare you as someone I will never forgive for any reason, I still will for one reason. I still care for you."

Edelgard was caught off guard by this. "Oh... t-thank-"

"But," Dimitri said with a harsh tone, "I have not forgotten what you did, and I never will, given what you, as the Flame Emperor, have done. I want you to understand this clearly, because I sure as Hell am not convinced that you won't try to conquer Fódlan again. I'll be watching you, as will Claude." Dimitri put out the cigar on the ground. "For the record, if you had bothered to start a dialogue, maybe we would've worked together, as..." He trailed off before walking out of the tent.

It was just the three of them now. Byleth looked at Edelgard, and put his hand on her shoulder once more.

"I think I know exactly what you Woke up from, and I'll admit, it's not exactly the best scenario possible, but it was one of the better ones for me... for you. I'll be honest. When you took that axe for me, I hadn't gotten all my emotions back yet. But even still, your death hit me extremely hard."

"O-oh!" Edelgard put a hand on Byleth's shoulder. "I... I'm so sorry."

Byleth smiled faintly. "You just apologized for saving my life." He shook his head. "I… understand why you did that."

"Yes, but let's be frank. I doubt you two will ever be a thing, even with all the time we have." Sothis's voice cut through the tent like a spear. "So whatever you're holding on to, you should just go ahead and forget it."

Edelgard felt her heart shatter into a million pieces at that blunt and seemingly callous remark, and she visibly deflated at that news. But she noticed something she didn't expect from Byleth. Something she had hardly ever seen before.

Visible anger.

"Sothis!" He bellowed.

"More tact next time?" Sothis said before Byleth stomped towards the radio and grabbed it. "H-hey! Wait-" After cutting off Sothis by Pocketing the radio, he turned towards Edelgard.

"I'm... sorry you had to hear that, but given how chaotic things will get, I don't think things will go the way any of us would expect." Byleth put his hands on Edelgard's shoulders and gave her a look of determination. "Whatever happens next, it'll happen, be it good or bad. I'm so sorry."

"I... I understand, my teacher. I need a moment alone."

"Take all the time you need." Byleth gave her one last glance over his shoulder, before ducking under the tent's flap. Edelgard fell on her knees and began to weep in sorrow. The Edelgard that cried was long gone, and yet she wept. She finally had the Fódlan she envisioned, and in less than an hour, she'd lost everything all over again. And she feared she may never get any of it again.

Not again. All that work, undone. The freedom from tyranny. The end of those monsters who did this to me. My love. I could end up having to fight my dear teacher working for Rhea.

Oh... please, for the love of everything, don't tell me she's next. I don't want her here period. After all she's done, I… I just want her gone forever.

"What was that for?" Byleth shouted at Sothis while she sat at her throne.

"Well, excuse me for wanting to rip off the bandaid."

"Edelgard just got ripped from what she believed to be the best for Fódlan, sacrificed herself for me, and then got told of the other paths that end with her dying. She didn't need any more hardships."

Sothis scoffed. "Are you seriously trying to tell me that she deserves better? After everything she did?"

Byleth growled in frustration as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Edelgard isn't evil, Sothis. She is stubborn, yes, but her heart is in the right place."

"The right place, but the wrong methods. Seriously, what do you see in her that I don't? Is it that you... have feelings for her? That you love her?"

Byleth gritted his teeth and spat back with, "I'm just really worried for Edelgard. She clearly took the news really hard, and it will be even tougher when Rhea Activates."

Sothis was given pause at the mention of Rhea, and then closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"...My daughter is directly opposed to Edelgard, Byleth. If she's next, then things are going to get much worse before it gets better, and her Activating, along with the rest of my family within the Church is, at the very least, inevitable. You've got the unenviable role of having to mediate Dimitri, Claude, Edelgard and my daughter, and I doubt the latter two are going to play nice with each other. And let's not get started on who else we've been thinking were going to Activate."

Byleth hung his head with unease.

Sothis slouched and put her chin on her hand. "Say what you will about how you feel about me, but I do still trust you enough to go about this mess to the best of your abilities. The best advice I can say is tread even more lightly than normal. Claude is laid back enough to ease in quickly, and Sayori's involvement really helped Dimitri become much better as a person. Edelgard has neither the calmness nor the experience of something truly perfect for most, if not all."

Byleth said nothing, but knew deep down what was going to come next anyway.

"And that goes double for anyone else from the Monastery."

"Yes. Of course."

"Good. We're in it for the long haul, and I'm not looking forward to it." Sothis sank into her throne with a tired look in her eyes. "Go to sleep. I'm sure you're just as tired by what happened tonight as I am now."

"You'd be correct. Goodnight, Sothis." Byleth said before leaving.

Sothis let out a quiet snore. It was the most comfortable thing she could do at the moment.

(Awesomedude17) (FE:3H x DC Comics)

**3.8 Quivers, Mallets, and Switches**

Claude Awoke in an urban setting, munching down on a McChicken sandwich. At first, he assumed that he was in the Hub again.

And then he saw some thugs in a nearby alley get hit by a bunch of boxing gloves attached to arrows.

Looking at his Loop Memories, and remembering superheroes like Batman and Superman clearly told him one thing.

Fun times ahead. Claude quickly looked for brightly colored outfits and found a man in green hop from rooftop to rooftop, continuing his patrol.

That was so obvious to Claude that the only reason no one noticed him was because people didn't bother looking up without prompting.

Oliver Queen finished his patrol and decided to take a load off over at the Quiver. He went over to the mini fridge and grabbed a beer. When he turned around, he saw Claude lounging in his chair.

"Hey there."

"You better be Loopy or else."

"Or else what? You'll get an Anchor and whack me upside the head?"

Ollie chuckled and shook his head. "I already like you, kid. Oliver "Green Arrow" Queen. Earth 2 Branch."

"Claude von Riegan. Fodlan Branch."

"Never heard of it. You new?"

"Kinda? Last I counted, it was about thirty thousand, and the Anchor went through like... a hundred times more."

Ollie nodded. "Sounds about right. Keep an eye out for Dick Greyson. He'll give you the lowdown of this place."

"Thanks. What're you calling this hideout?"

"The Quiver."

"Well it's a better name than what I first thought off: Arrow Cave."

"Ha... yeah." Ollie said hiding a wince.

An unfamiliar female voice then shouted out, "Still takin' credit for my idea, ain'tcha?"

Ollie sighed. "Hi Harley."

A woman dropped down, between Claude and Ollie. "Heya, Ollie. Nice ta see ya again."

"Nice to see you too. Claude, this is one of our new Loopers, Harley. Harley-"

"I already know who Khalid is, ya schmuck!"

Claude took out Failnaught. "How do you know my real name?"

"Because I played ya game, ya big dummy, and I gotta say, I feel real sorry ya had to deal with Rhea. That arrogant bitch."

"Wait, his real name's Khalid?" Oliver asked.

Claude sighed. "Yes, it is. I prefer Claude, and apparently Harley chose another path first before mine."

"Don'tcha have a Nintendo Switch, Ollie?"

"...Nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnoooooooooo..." Ollie drawn out that one single word.

"You're gonna have to fix that. As for you, Claude. Lemme take ya ta Gotham. I'm sure Nightwing would like ta meetcha."

"Sure... I guess." Claude blinked.

He sure as hell was going to have to deal with people calling him Khalid every so often from here on out apparently.

(Tetradrachm) (FE:3H)

### 3.9 Love is a Many-Splendored Thing

Another Loop with Edelgard Awake, another tense go around at the monastery. Frankly, Claude was getting tired of it.

Edelgard had put up something of a metaphorical brick wall between herself and all the other Loopers since she'd Activated, refusing to talk to any of them outside of when it was absolutely necessary. She'd outright left the monastery at the start of the Loop twice, taking only Hubert with her, and they'd vanished entirely; the other loops she'd been Awake she'd taken able command of her house and then her empire, smashing the gutter snakes on her own and then reforming Adrestia along her usual lines. Either way, she would only meet and talk to the other Loopers about political necessities or occasionally strategies to fight the mole people, and every time it was uncomfortable and tense as anything.

Byleth was tremendously guilt-stricken about the whole situation, not to mention at some sort of odds with Sothis about the whole thing. The goddess hadn't had an independent Loop from Byleth since Edelgard's Activation, but from what little he'd heard Sothis didn't seem to share Byleth's guilt when it came to the Adrestian princess. They were unified in their concern for Edelgard, though, right alongside Dimitri and himself. She had told each of them individually that she just needed "time to think," and Byleth told them all to

accept it—Claude was immensely mindful and grateful for the therapy training Byleth had had in a Fused Loop—but Edelgard had had literal years to think about it by now. Would she just keep to herself forever?

That way lie madness, and a crushing isolation that Claude knew all too well from when he had first arrived in Fódlan in Baseline. But he couldn't help her, or Byleth either, who was hurting almost as badly, because if he were honest with himself he had the exact same problem. Every Looper in their Branch did.

It was that problem that kept him up late nights at the library during slower times at the monastery, between the regular checklist of battles to be fought and friends to help. It was that problem that he could see etched into Dimitri's face on one of those late nights when he joined him in the library, half-distracted by a ring he idly twisted between his fingers.

"You okay there, Dimitri?" Claude asked, deliberately careless in glancing up from his "book." It wasn't really an ordinary book; it was an enchanted computer of sorts, holding thousands of different Looper and non-Looper books in its spell work that he could choose from. It was a common device across Yggdrasil for Loopers that wanted to blend in and look like they were reading an ordinary book, and Byleth had picked up copies for them all in their Vorkosigan Loop. Again, he was very grateful for that Loop.

"I'm fine," Dimitri said tonelessly, still distracted with the ring.

Claude decided to try for a joke. "That's not a Ring of Power, is it? I know I've been wanting a Fused Loop for a while now, but I was kinda hoping it wouldn't be one with Sauron running around..."

"Uh, no, what?" Dimitri finally shook himself out of his stupor and shot Claude an embarrassed look. "No, it's just an ordinary...well, not magical ring."

Something sparkled on its rim. "That's a very beautiful ring," Claude said quietly, pulling the levity out of his voice. He was almost certain what it was—he had a pair of them stashed safely in his own Pocket.

Dimitri made steady eye contact with him and sagged with something like relief. "It is," he said simply. "It was...my wedding ring, last Loop." Claude just nodded. "The Loop went longer than normal," Dimitri almost rushed to explain, "and it was a very late Awakening, after I'd already been engaged...we had a few, very happy years together." His face took on a strange expression. "I hadn't even realized I had an interest in men as well as women, until then."

Oh. Claude leaned back in his chair, momentarily surprised. Then he broke into an easy grin. "Well, who was the lucky guy?"

"Dedue." If this were Dimitri as he had been when he first came to the Monastery in Baseline, he would have been embarrassed; if this were Dimitri as he were after Byleth's return in Baseline, he might have said it defensively. Now, though, he just smiled tenderly with some memory. "We spent much of the time working to heal the divide between Duscur and the rest of Faerghus, but our spare moments were peaceful and happy, even." His smile grew wistful.

"And now it hurts to see him here, not remembering, doesn't it?" Claude knew he was being harsh, but he immediately realized he'd overstepped by the way Dimitri flinched. "Wait, I'm sorry, I just..." He groaned and ran a hand over his head. How did Dimitri always end up making him drag up his own issues? "I've had the same problem. I Woke Up after having gotten married, and it was wonderful." He swallowed. "And then we come back to the beginning and it's all gone, and it's tough."

Dimitri didn't say anything, but nodded and gave him a rueful smile. What else was there to say? There wasn't anything you could do about the hurt that wasn't dangerous in other ways, not even according to ancient Looper wisdom. He'd been reading up on it, after all.

"Would it make you feel any better to know that Loopers hundreds of times older than we are haven't come up with any good solutions?" Claude asked wryly. He lifted his "book" off the table. "There's an entire genre of Looper romance advice. People talk about how to handle not having a Looper lover, how to handle Waking Up into a marriage, even a couple books about cross-Loop romance." He made a face as he recalled the one book about that he'd tried to read. "I don't think I ever want to meet Slaanesh in person."

"Cross Loop romance?" Dimitri was taken aback. "Is that even possible?"

"Single Loop stands happen during Fused Loops all the time according to these guys. If you're not in a really long term relationship—or actually, sometimes even if you are—if you feel a connection with someone from some other Branch you might just marry them. It's like dating in the Hub or, uh, in the Fused Loop you had."

Dimitri chuckled. "I wasn't exactly thinking about romance during my time there, but yes, I remember the idea." He shook his head. "I can't imagine spending eternity going from one fleeting romance to another, though. I'd like to find someone to love for longer than just a few years!"

"Aren't you a romantic," Claude teased him. "Besides, don't you think you're thinking a bit small scale?"

"What do you mean?"

"Remember about all of the endings we found on the Hub, for our video game? All of us Looping so far might Wake Up married to any one of a dozen or more of our friends here at the monastery. If more people start Activating, well—"

"I can't think about it that way," Dimitri interrupted him. "If Dedue Activated next Loop, he almost certainly wouldn't remember that last Loop. It wouldn't be the same sort of relationship, because I'm not

the same person I was in Baseline. Even during the marriage, I was half pretending to be someone I'm not anymore." His joy at thinking about Dedue was gone. "I told him I was a Looper, but I don't think he really understood what it meant. How could he?"

"So you're saying it isn't so simple as waiting for our friends to Activate?"

"I'm saying that if I was going to be with someone, it would have to be starting all over again, as a Looper. Not building off of something that doesn't exist anymore, not unless they remembered as well." His eyes widened briefly, as if he realized something. "Who wrote those books on romance?"

"Uh..." Claude had to mentally shift gears. "Lots of people?" Dimitri had already unPocketed his own magic book and flipped through it, searching for something. "People from all the famous old Branches...the Original Seven, the superhero Branches, Equestria..."

"I don't see them..." Dimitri said to himself. Then he looked back up to Claude. "I was wondering if Sayori or her Branch's Loopers had written anything about it. She once told me her Branch had something of a history with it..."

"The Literature Club?" He only knew them personally from watching Byleth play through some of their game. She had come out of it first and foremost feeling sorry for them all, and he could see why. "One of them wrote something that caught my eye..." He flipped through his own book. "No, wait, that was just Natsuki's 'Encyclosweetsia.' I was thinking of showing Mercedes some of these recipes, they look amazing."

"You'd be the one to know," Dimitri said ruefully. "Anyway, it doesn't matter, I just wondered if she'd...well, never mind."

Dimitri greatly respected Sayori, Claude knew that much. She'd taught him a lot, in more ways than one; he kept up his practice in some of her blade styles, but also her suggestions on maintaining

his mental well-being. It was only now that Claude wondered if there was another dimension to his admiration.

He wasn't about to bring that up now, though, not when Dimitri was still grieving. Tree knew he'd spent long, lonely hours grieving for Hilda, and he wouldn't have wanted Byleth or anyone to start asking him how he felt about Petra or whoever back then. So instead, he cocked his head back to his book and said, "It isn't all bad news, though. I was just reading something a bit more positive. It's," he turned a few pages and showed Dimitri the cover page with the happy couple, "a sort of autobiography about a romance, the story of how these two got together and have stayed together for so long."

Dimitri furrowed his brow at the title. "'The Flight of the Bumbleby'?"

Claude grinned. "It's a pun, based on a joke from the Hub. Yang—the one on the left—she loves puns. But seriously, these two have been together for millions of years and they've really been through a lot. It's inspiring, but you can tell they're also both really cool people. And you know, their Baseline is a lot like ours—I wouldn't be surprised if we had a Fused Loop one day."

Dimitri peered over at the title again and then pulled it up on his own book. "Oh, the Remnant Branch—Sayori mentioned them once, I think. You said they'd been together for millions of years?"

"I know, I'm not used to thinking that big either. It's...scary, honestly."

Dimitri smiled faintly. "It puts our small strife to shame, doesn't it?"

"That doesn't make it any less real to us now." Then again, it did make a couple of years to think about things not nearly so concerning. Maybe Edelgard had wrapped her head around the idea of eternity better than they had.

On the other hand, if she didn't, maybe he could help her after all. Something from Blake and Yang's book suddenly came to mind. "Hey, Dimitri," Claude asked suddenly, startling the prince out of his

book. "How would you like to work on a project with me for a few days?"

"A project?" Claude was smiling already. "I don't like that look, Claude."

"It's just something I read. The Remnant Loopers, when things get tough for them, a lot of the time they work it out through what they call shenanigans. I'm thinking maybe we could actually help everybody—us, Teach, Edelgard—if we actually got up to some shenanigans of our own."

Dimitri sighed. "Claude, I really don't feel up to—"

"Ah, ah, ah! You've already heard me scheming. I can't let you out of being part of the plan now."

Dimitri sighed more heavily. "I...suppose I have nothing better to do."

"That's the spirit. Okay, don't worry, this won't be anything too difficult..."

Edelgard watched carefully as Ferdinand and Caspar took leading positions precisely where she had ordered them to go, with the rest of the class following in line. A few well-placed words, she had long since learned, could break down Ferdinand's ego and get him in line much more quickly than in Baseline.

"Lady Edelgard," Hubert purred beside her, "the Deer and Lions seem to be coordinating to attack us first."

"Damnation," she swore. Although this wasn't as important as the Battle of the Eagle and Lion, she still prided herself on achieving a victory in this first mock battle as often as she could, since her l—Byleth had the decency to sit them out and not choose a side. She wasn't sure why Dimitri and Claude would have chosen to work together for the battle this Loop, but she didn't have the time to try and figure it out. "Everyone, assume a defensive formation!"

Bernadetta squealed with terror but overall the closing of ranks went off without a hitch. Edelgard watched as Dimitri and Claude spearheaded advances on both sides through the undergrowth. They spotted each other and nodded before seemingly reaching in thin air to summon—

"What are they holding?" Caspar asked in bewilderment.

"My lady, I believe this is some sort of trap," Hubert growled.

"No," Edelgard almost couldn't believe what she was seeing as the two boys ran at them, "no, I think those are—"

"GET PIE'D!" Claude shouted, before he tossed what could have only been an immaculate vanilla cream pie far too far away to actually hit her. Then some sort of wind magic picked up, and her and Hubert were both hit square in the face.

"I would appreciate it dearly if you never did that again," Edelgard snapped minutes later.

"I'm not promising anything," Claude answered cheerfully. The three house leaders were waiting down in the field for Byleth and the rest of the faculty to arrive; the Black Eagles had won the match because they'd defeated him and Dimitri moments later, but it had been completely worth it. She had actually demanded they stay and wait to be "punished"; Claude found everything about her reaction to be absolutely hilarious.

"I can't believe you would do something so blatantly childish," she continued. "Even you, Dimitri!"

For his part Dimitri looked almost as happy as Claude felt. "There's no harm in it, surely? And besides, honestly, it's nice to talk to you again, El."

She froze, mouth slightly open, as Byleth and Manuela approached. "I...it..." she stammered. "Was this all some sort of ploy to talk to

me?"

"For the record, I mostly did it just to pie Hubert," Claude admitted. "But yeah, actually talking to you like a regular person isn't so bad either."

She huffed out indignantly. Claude caught Dimitri's eye and gave him a thumbs up. This was only just the beginning, Claude knew, but it was already a vast improvement.

(Awesomedude17) (FE:3H x Doom)

**3.10 The Encroaching Doom**

Claude Awoke and pinged. He got two in response and looked around.

The fact that Dimitri and Edelgard nodded together put him somewhat at unease.

"Claude, Edelgard and I are Awake, but the professor is not. She's just finished our mission to retrieve Monica."

"You mean-"

"Yes." Edelgard interrupted. "I insisted that you and Dimitri join me in watching over her while Rhea speaks to her."

Claude sighed. "Have I ever told you that I don't like tense situations?"

"All the time." Dimitri replied as the group entered the throne room.

"Ah, there you are. Stand right there. Feel free to speak if you have anything to ask Monica." Rhea said.

"Of course, Archbishop." Edelgard replied. The three then stood to the side as Rhea talked with Kronya. She couldn't help but note that

Solon, disguised as Tomas, was there in the room as well. Seteth was also there, right next to Byleth.

Things went along fairly smoothly as the three expected.

"Very well. If there aren't any objections, then I shall let you go off with Lady Edelg-"

The door flew open, and there was an extremely unfamiliar figure: hulking man in green and brown armor, his fists clenched in what seemed like endless fury. His upper arms were bare, and attached to his left arm was some sort of blade. On his left shoulder was some strange device that no one in the room recognized. His visor was opaque, and his face was visible, becoming clearer as he approached.

Rhea immediately recognized him, and was shocked.

"You?! But you're supposed to be a mere myth!"

The man silently tossed a head towards Rhea. She, as well as Solon, Kronya and, of course, the Looping trio recognized him as the mastermind behind everything that seemingly went wrong with Fodlan.

Thales.

"The Agarthans! They were..." Rhea closed her eyes and grasped her hands together in an attempt to calm herself down. After a few tense moments, she spoke up. "Everyone, you are witnessing a legend amongst more than just men. He is... the Doom Slayer." Rhea said with a hint of fear.

The room went silent as everyone processed this information. He silently scanned the room. Dimitri could tell from underneath his opaque visor that he had a look of pure, unbridal rage.

"I've never heard of this... Doom slayer, Archbishop." Edelgard remarked.

"Indeed. It is an old tale. So old, only a small few still know of the tales of his eternal war against the forces of Hell itself. Even I thought it was just a story when I first heard it, and yet here he is, bringing me the head of someone who was the enemy of the Goddess."

"Excuse me?" Claude was really uneasy now. Rhea was really frightened by this guy. He looked like a bizarre mix of barbarian and space marine, and that brought up some worrying questions.

It didn't help that he hasn't even so much as made a sound beyond the sounds of his heavy footsteps.

He took out his double barreled shotgun, and aimed it at Kronya. Before anyone could process this information, he blasted her to bits, leaving only her lower torso and her head intact. Her disguise fell and the group could only look on in shock.

"S-she was an imposter!" Byleth said. "But, that means..."

"Baron Ochs' daughter may not even be alive..." Rhea finished with a dawning horror.

The Doom Slayer then turned to Solon, and extended his wrist blade.

The three Loopers all thought the same thing.

He knew.

Solon decided to cut his losses and unveiled himself right then and there and prepared to attack. Unfortunately, the Doom Slayer was swifter than he appeared, and found his throat stabbed through. In one swift motion, everything above his neck was split in half, and Solon's corpse fell to the ground.

The Doom Slayer retracted his blade and promptly began to walk away.

"Do not pursue him, Seteth. It's an exercise in futility." Rhea warned.

"He... he revealed the infiltration within the Church itself."

The three house lords looked at each other before they looked at the Slayer. He then looked over his shoulder.

Ping.

The three lords quickly realized how he knew so much about those who slithered in the dark, but even without this reveal, they knew one thing for sure.

The Doom Slayer was not someone who hesitated to make actions.

(ShadowMurlock) (FE:3H)

**3.11 To be a true protagonist...**

Byleth and Sothis had awoken in their usual bed in Remire Village and so far the loop seemed to be a regular null baseline run.

At least, until his first meeting with the lords where Edelgard had tripped, somehow unintentionally backflipped and landed on Byleth, knocking them both over and leading to a rather... awkward mounting position.

"Mercenary! Pray unhand me!" A heavily blushing, and decidedly unawake Edelgard shoved herself off the Anchor in a panicked frenzy.

From the looks of mirth and confusion respectively on Claude and Dimitri's face, Byleth concluded that they were, fortunately, unawake as well.

The Ashen Demon was thankful neither would remember this loop.

"Son, I know you're a magnet for women trouble. But could you at least wait until you've learnt her name?" Jeralt sighed as if it wasn't the first hundred times he had seen it happen.

' *Which it isn't! It seems this loop when my daughter transferred my crest stone into your body, you had ended up with what can be best described as 'Ecchi Harem Protagonist Syndrome* '!' Sothis giggled intensely, very much looking forward to the loop.

Byleth's internal sigh was one of exasperation.

This would be a long loop.

The occurrences that preceded his first steps into the monastery were uneventful to his relief, but he was wary of what could happen, having read enough hub-loop literature prior to gain a good understanding of his predicament.

Of course, he couldn't predict the sothis-darned Archbishop herself to fall from the sky, or rather, the monastery's balcony, into his arms in a princess carry.

The complete befuddlement displayed on the woman's face spoke volumes about the situation and she coughed lightly. "I suppose... I must thank you, my child. I do not think I have ever fallen into a man's arms like this before. Please do allow me to regain my footing."

Literally everyone in the courtyard stared in silence as Byleth slowly let Rhea back on her feet before the woman glided away with visibly less composure than the imposing figure staring down at her flock less than a minute before.

"Didn't even see her this time before an accident happened." Jeralt grunted. "That's a new record set in less than a week."

Byleth places both hands over his face in despair of what was to come.

*How right he was. Within the next 2 weeks, he had somehow ended up in compromising positions with every, he was not exaggerating, every female within the monastery walls, including his students.*

*It had taken half the amount of time for the newly-appointed professor to gain a moniker change from his unfortunate mishaps and anguished over the fact that soon all of Fódlan come to use it.*

*Who were the bastards that coined him the 'Lecherous Demon'!?*

*How did the loops out there where this was the norm survive?*

*Dorothea landed a haymaker square on his jaw and stormed off rage with rage after Byleth had somehow ended up on the ground peering up her skirt.*

*"To think you'd be filthier than a noble! To think I thought you were respectable!" The songstress snarled.*

*Byleth was too unconscious to respond.*

*Bernedetta had literally ascended after she'd accidentally spun like a top and ended up being hugged from the back by her newest professor.*

*She would not leave her room for the next week.*

*'Are you doing the coming on me? I fear I am too young.' Trust Petra to draw the most attention speaking her broken Fódlanese at the worst times.*

*Being interrogated by the church knights was not a fun process...*

*"Oh my. Are you alright, dear professor? I hope you're okay!"*

*Damn it Mercedes! I literally just planted my face right between your melons! Don't act like there's nothing wrong here! This is making me feel really bad!*

*He felt less bad when Jeritza ambushed him moments later swinging a sword with full intent to kill.*

*"Wha-? Professor! Wha-what are you do-doing!" A certain ginger named Annette shrieked as she felt someone's hand on her rear. What is shambala was this curse!? The girl is way underaged! And then Gilbert spied the professor and his estranged daughter.*

*How in the world does a man in heavy armor run that fast?*

*The game of cat and mouse between professor and ginger knight continued to be a source of gossip till this day...*

*Byleth curled up as he clutched his family jewels, groaning in agony from the devastating kick dealt by one Ingrid as she stalked away.*

*"I haven't done anything to you!" The Lecherous Demon screeched, his voice one pitch higher.*

*"That's just a warning!" The blonde shouted back. "I'll be ripping them off if you do try anything! Already dealing with one pervert on a daily basis, don't need another!"*

*"Lech! Scum! Plague of Fódlan! I shall purge your existence from the annals of the continent's history!" A assortment of deadly spells launched by the young lady of snow white hair blew holes in the surroundings as they missed the Anchor.*

*"I've done nothing filthy to you Lysithea! Why are you attacking me!" Byleth felt extremely wronged as he dodged her bolts*

*This only served to enrage the 15 year old further. "You saw me jump at shadows on the wall. I'm not scared! I'll show you I'm not, you vile cretin!"*

*"Lysithea, I won't tell anyone! I'm your teacher, remember? Wait is that Dark Spikes? When did you learn that-DON'T SHOOT-"*

**nuking sounds**

*"Ah professor. How are yo-?"*

*"Marianne, I literally just walked in on you changing how are you so calm!?"*

*The bluette looked downwards at her exposed undergarments. "Ah it seems I am..."*

*Hilda, who was next to her and equally exposed, was obviously less calm and rational in her reactions.*

*Byleth jumped at shadows for the next week, fearing the pinkette planting her axe in the base of his neck.*

*Literally every animal being hostile towards him was terrifying as well...*

*'Dear Yggdrasil.' Byleth awaited his judgement. 'Why did my 'curse' target Flayn?'*

*Falling into the pond with Flayn was an absolute mistake.*

*Getting out both dripping wet with her clinging to you was another.*

*But having the entire process noticed by her overprotective father known to threaten any fool who even spoke her into submission was a whole nother' level of screwed.*

*"Oh my professor." Flayn giggled. "It seems my clothes have become rather translucent, have they not?"*

*Seteth looked absolutely livid right about then.*

' *But I'd survived* !' The Anchor celebrated internally.

He'd walked right into the most compromising situations the loop had to throw at him and left very much scathed but still alive.

Maybe, just maybe...

It wouldn't be absolutely impossible to finish the loop normally-

The dining hall was filled with nearly every male in the monastery, all glaring at him with murderous intent.

Seteth, who he assumed to be their leader, stepped forward and spoke. His smile was certainly the brightest Byleth had ever seen him look, but his eyes were in no way smiling.

"Professor, I have something to ask of you."

His eyes opened to reveal his piercing reptilian gaze of a hunter gazing upon prey.

"Please do not resist while we end you."

Byleth was out of the hall before that statement concluded, and soon after the mob trailed behind.

*6 years later...*

Dimitri awoke in the wilderness and looked around at the rest of a group of four whom he distinctly recognised as fellow officers at Garreg Mach.

He looked through his loop memories.

Why was he on a continent-wide crusade against a Demon of Lust Incarnate who just so happened to look like the professor?

(Tetradrachm) (FE:3H)

**3.12 Reach for Her Hand**

"This state of things can't last forever, you know."

Byleth ignored Sothis' voice as he watched Dimitri and Edelgard spar beneath him. He'd picked this window inside the monastery to watch so that they couldn't actually see him.

He was still amazed that the lords had abruptly reconciled behind his back. Perhaps "reconciled" was too strong a term; they had stopped avoiding each other, at least, and even got together and trained every once in a while. He knew Claude's prank campaign on the Black Eagles had broken the ice, but the rest was a mutual effort to seek each other out.

An effort he still couldn't match.

"You could match it," Sothis demurred. "You're choosing to not reach out. Why is that?"

Byleth kept his eyes on his two students as their weapons finally met in a clash he could hear even from so far away. Their spar flashed into action, far faster than anything they'd ever managed in Baseline; he was so proud of how far they'd come. Dimitri's lance gleamed in the midday sun as he swung it around him almost like a baton, perfectly matching Edelgard's aggressive yet careful axe blows. Dimitri's age as a Looper gave him a slight edge, Byleth could tell, but it was a close call.

"Honestly," Sothis huffed. "Must you continue to act as the child having a temper tantrum?"

Byleth rolled his eyes and finally turned to her floating, blatantly unimpressed figure. "We've had this conversation a dozen times."

"And every time we have, you've avoided the main subject!" Byleth turned away. "And you know I'm right, too," Sothis continued.

"Yes," Byleth finally admitted. There was no point trying to hide some aspect of his feelings from Sothis. "And? You must understand why I can't reach out, too."

"I don't think you're certain of that yourself. That's why I want you to talk about it! We need to talk about it."

"I..." Byleth let out a long sigh, and leaned against the cool stone wall. "It wouldn't be healthy for either of us to reconnect. Our relationship, on her end, was based on false truths, and that's not even getting into the unhealthy power dynamics between teacher and student—"

"You're deflecting again," Sothis cut him off. "I wasn't talking about a romantic relationship, and you know it."

"I thought you didn't want me to have anything to do with her, at all."

"That...!" Sothis seemed briefly overwhelmed with shock and anger, and Byleth, to his immense shame, knew he deserved it. "I never said such a thing! That is so far from the truth as to be completely ridiculous! Why are you so vehement in your denial as to—" Her expression softened. "You're hurting, deep down, aren't you? That's what this is about?"

He nodded before he fully registered what she had said, but when it hit him he realized she was completely right. "I was deflecting in self-defense," he admitted. "I should have realized sooner, I'm sorry."

"No one can be a therapist to themself!" Sothis chided him. "You have nothing to apologize for. You can simply appreciate the fact that I had to sit through all of those psychology classes that you took as well. At any rate, what is it about Edelgard that wounds you so?"

Byleth glanced out the window again. "It's been years now. I know for a fact that she's seen how she was misled in Baseline, and what she got wrong, but whenever I see her, or hear what's she's done, I can tell she doesn't regret any of it. I'm not sure why that...hurts, though."

"She's disregarding how her actions hurt you." Sothis said, and frowned. "Her path she carved," and she almost spit those words like a curse, "was the needless product of Agarthan manipulation. She was their tool, even in Baseline."

"She genuinely thought she was doing what had to be done," Byleth was compelled to defend her. This wasn't about Edelgard's behavior in Baseline; he had long since come to terms with that. "And it isn't just about her disregard for me; she's sparring with Dimitri now, but does she really, totally understand how her betrayal hurt him, and how that was why he was so blunt with her when she Activated? Claude...not so much, but does she regret how her plan for revolution ignored the outside world? I just don't think she's taken everyone else into account...it's like a disdain for them, or something."

Sothis gave her a soft smile. "Your reluctance is born from care for your students, then? You really do love them, don't you?"

"I love them all, Sothis. Even if I hadn't Woken Up in so many married loops I would love them all equally. I just feel like El would make me choose her, somehow, and I can't do that."

"And you haven't asked for her opinion about this, why?"

"I don't think she'd be honest with me."

Sothis faltered. "You may be right, she holds her cards so closely to her chest. And of course, you probably aren't the best person to help her open up, given your history."

"Then what do we do?"

"I suggest we look for outside help. Someone from another Branch, who doesn't have all of our entanglements." Byleth could see the logic in that. "Someone who isn't tangled up in our ball of red string."

"Only a few hundred—or thousand—years till then, I suppose."

"Why must you be so negative?"

Byleth shrugged.